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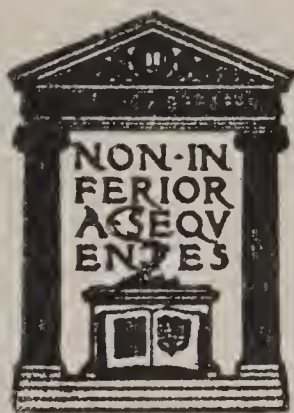
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THE HAUNTED HOUSE OF MARLEY

(Merely Michael)

By MARK SOMERS ::

Author of "The Bridge," "The Endless Quest"



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CHAPTER I

ON a night in November—the seventeenth, to be exact—four men were gathered round the massive table of Marley House. Dinner was over, and in its pleasant after-glow Dick Marley and Michael Frayne turned to the firelight with a sense of well-being after a hard day's hunting over a stiffish bit of country. They smoked and drowsed and took but a fitful interest in the talk wherein Bailey joined issue with old Jimmy, his host.

I say 'old,' for 'old Jimmy' he always has been, with his round jolly face and his ready smile, taking his simple pleasure in life and giving of it to others. Such a man was James Marley, possessed of popularity and the air of one who never worries.

Michael was vaguely conscious of the murmur of voices and of the firelight; sometimes he was conscious of nothing at all; and Dick was in a like condition. It was old Jimmy's voice which roused them both.

"Damn nonsense! I have heard that sort of thing before." There was a humorous twinkle in his eyes and the flames lit up his rosy face until it glowed like a harvest moon. "Listen to this," he bellowed in a voice that roused Dick with a start.

"What's that? . . . What?" he repeated with a yawn.

"I was telling him of the Somme country—how it is a haunted country, now and for always." It was Bailey who explained in his quiet way. He had come down to Marley that afternoon after a month's re-visiting old-remembered scenes in Picardy.

Jimmy snorted, then he winked. But Bailey was not to be put off.

"You remember," he said, addressing Michael but with his gaze fixed on the fire; "you remember that bright little spot where Dick copped it, and where you——"

Michael cut him short: "Yes," and he frowned. He never cared to talk about that sort of thing himself.

"Well, I rode all over the country. . . . It was dusk when I got to that particular spot. The horse I was riding was an old French hack. . . . Need one say more?"

"It had no imagination, like old Mickey here," drawled Dick. He was about twenty-eight, but his smooth, sun-tanned face and laughing eyes made him look more boyish still.

Michael's good-humoured, resolute face lost none of its imperturbability; he stretched himself, swinging his great arms above his head, and yawning mightily. Bailey continued:

"As twilight settled down, the old hack got more jumpy. A mist was forming in the valley. I turned the horse's head towards the crest—you remember that mound of the dead? . . . Well, I cantered him up the slope of that. He did not want to go a bit, it was all I could do to keep him to it. Near the top he pulled up in a sweat and refused to go further, forefeet planted well in front of him and muscles rigid. I felt him tremble under me. Suddenly he reared on end—that ancient Paris hack!—spun round and bolted. It was a couple of miles before I could pull him up."

Jimmy laughed. "Simply an association of ideas. Your mind harked back to what had happened in the past, and your imagination peopled the living silence with the dead. So you scare yourself and end in scaring the old hack."

Bailey shook his head. "No," he said, "it is not all

subjective—at least, there is more to it than that. Mind, I'm not saying it is 'spooks.' I don't believe in them myself. But there is some unknown quantity—a thought, influence, call it what you please—and it's there you'll find it, where the ground is soaked in blood, and the atmosphere charged with the passions of men who killed and were killed."

Jimmy sat bolt upright, his chin thrust forward at its most defiant angle. "Now, look here," he said, a spark of steel in his eyes, "this old house of Marley is said to be haunted. It had lain empty for years when I returned to England after making that little bit in the Colonies which enabled me to buy it back into the family."

Nothing fanciful about Jimmy. Not much sentiment either, save that of re-establishing a long-decayed house. He proceeded:

"It passed out of the family on the death of Rupert Marley, he who fought against the Roundheads and ended by committing suicide in that hall of the old wing which I shall show you presently. There was no money left, and the place was shut up for a couple of centuries, until it was bought by a successful cotton-spinner. And he—well, it is a fact, or rather a coincidence, that it should be that same hall in which he chose to end a successful career with a bullet through his head. There was a curious lack of motive, it is true; everything prospering with him, and his family launched in the world and doing well. . . . What's that?" he queried. "A proof of what you say? Not a bit of it! A fit of madness, and nothing more." He examined the inch of ash he was carefully retaining on the end of his cigar.

"Well——?"

"Well, the old house lay empty again until I came along to buy it. And here I am. I have lived here for eight years now, and the proof of the pudding is in the

eating. Here I am. . . . I don't look like a suicide, do I?" he demanded with the fat, merry chuckle we all loved him for. His red, chubby face creased into a network of wrinkles.

Michael was listening now. The sleep had gone out of his eyes and he was watching the candle-light on Bailey's keenly sensitive face, noting the fine lines of it and the intelligence of the high, broad forehead. One of those men from whom something brilliant is always expected: at school, where he had first met Bailey, and again in their 'Varsity days. But nothing had come of it, nothing so far.

"But," Bailey objected, "you don't use the old wing, Jimmy. And that is where the 'influence' rests."

Jimmy laughed heartily as he answered: "And that is just where you are wrong, young fellow. I use it quite a lot in winter. The open hearth is what I like. The alcove is roomy and restful, and it is cosy; and there is a flight of stairs connecting the hall with my bedroom."

Before parting for the night, old Jimmy insisted on their inspecting his "haunted hall," tramping down the long passage in front of them to show the way.

"It is more or less my study," he observed. "I come in here to read before tumbling off to bed—more so as the nights draw in."

They had come to the end of the long, dim corridor, and as he spoke Jimmy threw open the door.

"This," said he, "is the old hall."

CHAPTER II

MICHAEL paused a moment, with Bailey peering over his shoulder.

He recollected the rare occasions on which he had been in the old hall, and the vague misgivings always left behind. He was not a fanciful man—his friends put it in stronger terms than that—but there was something conveyed to his mind by the atmosphere of the place, and to which he confessed when I taxed him with it.

“You feel,” he said, “the inevitable something that must have happened here—and it has still the air of awaiting its hour.”

An inexplicable obsession ; he regarded it as such, and there he left it.

They entered the great medieval hall in silence, treading lightly with an almost instinctive dread of awaking sound ; and as they made their way to the fireplace at the far end the shadows kept closing in behind.

“Something ought to happen here—I don’t know what.”

It was Bailey who spoke, and almost in a whisper, but Michael started at words which so nearly echoed his own thoughts.

Bailey was not surprised at a man shooting himself in such a place. He gave an odd little laugh as he said it, breaking off with a gasp as a curtain suddenly billowed out and a shadow travelled up the wall, swayed an instant, and was gone.

Jimmy’s eyes began to dance. He shot a glance at

Bailey. "Makes you jump—eh? It is little things like that which give the old house a bad name. But there is no vice in it. Come along and warm up at the fire." And he led the way at a brisker pace, chuckling fatly to himself.

It was a large hall, the length of it considerable in proportion to its width. At the end at which they had entered there was a wide staircase leading to a gallery above, with a corridor on which Jimmy's bedroom opened. It was all in darkness, but at the further end there was a bright ring of light where, in a deep alcove, contained between two buttress-like walls, a huge log fire shot out living flames which crackled as they leapt up the vast chimney.

The alcove alone was some thirty by twenty feet, and famous for its old carved panelling. Above the great chimney was a masterpiece of sculpture in stone wrought by an Italian of the fifteenth century, in the centre of which was blazoned the family escutcheon of the Marleys. It was a valuable fixture; an extravagant offer had been made for it the previous year by a Marley long settled in America. Save for a few chairs of modern design and a bookcase, the furniture was stained with age and damp.

Outside the circle of brilliant light which filled the alcove, things were vague and shadowy, the fire now and then sending strange flickering lights and shadows up and down the old tapestries and suits of mail, or playing on the low oak-raftered ceiling, and sometimes falling on ancient, gloomy curtains which draped the narrow windows.

A portière spanned the space between one of the buttresses and the main wall of the hall. Jimmy drew this aside, disclosing a glass door, and explained:

"The door leads to the conservatory below, and that, in turn, has its exit on the old yew shrubbery which surrounds the vault wherein all good Marleys are laid to rest. . . . There is a pane of glass broken here, as you see. A gust

of wind has blown the outer door open because the carpenter has removed the lock to mend it and not replaced it yet. The portière billows out in the draught—and there you are! But knowing a man committed suicide here, it makes you jump—eh?” and he gave a wink at Bailey.

If, he added, your imagination demands that a place be haunted, haunted it will remain. His did not; that was the difference.

Dick Marley glanced about him. “I think——” he began, and stopped.

A curious little sigh took him suddenly, and the words which had formed on his lips were never spoken. The irresponsible gaiety had died out of his face; and, watching him closely, Michael wondered if the same feeling weighed on Dick—the feeling of suspense imprisoned within four walls; or whether that other cause were at work of which he had heard for the first time that afternoon.

The four were ranging themselves in comfort about the fire when there came a soft, stealthy footstep from behind, and Peters appeared, bearing a tray with glasses and a curiously wrought crystal decanter.

He was a good servant, Peters. He went about his work swiftly and silently, but never once have I seen him smile. The pallor of his face was accentuated by the black clothes he wore, and his skin was like parchment; that, together with his lank black hair, and his inveterate habit of keeping his eyes on the ground, made a rather unprepossessing person of him. Peters’ pessimism was of the confirmed order, like that of a man hoping for the worst while fearing the best. The gloom of the fellow was abyssmal, and in marked contrast to the geniality of the master he had served for many years, so that I have often wondered in what part of the globe old Jimmy picked him up.

The alcove was a snug little corner, could you have eliminated the vast background of shadows. Jimmy rose to do the honours, and I can picture the hearty old fellow myself, rubicund of countenance and jovial, plying decanter and syphon for himself and his friends.

He really could not imagine, he remarked blandly, why people should let their minds dwell on past associations when there was nothing in the present but an atmosphere of comfort and a pre-war blend of whisky which was none too bad. Neurotic emotionalism is what he termed it. So saying, he applied himself to his glass.

"It may not be the best place for a man afflicted with a depression. But I"—and old Jimmy's laugh rang out—"I am not that man."

Bailey's face lighted up in the firelight. He regarded old Jimmy with a look of affection and said: "You are a perfect Tapley in your humour, Jimmy. You buy a house that is tumbling to pieces, and live in the gloomy wings so that you may smile in it."

"As my forebears smiled before me. Dick there is the last of the old Marleys, and he can smile too, though he is infernally dull to-night. . . . Not yourself, my lad," he said. "Not your bucking, merry self. What's the matter?"

But Dick made no reply to the old man's kindly inquiry.

Michael had risen and was examining the exquisite old panelling more closely. He wheeled half round, and his glance encountered Dick's. Suddenly he looked away; but his finger must have pressed a spring, for at that moment a panel flew open, disclosing a niche and a pistol concealed within.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed. "What's this?"

He was about to take it out and examine it, but a look on Jimmy's face caused him to close the panel instead. Associating the whole with an incident in Jimmy's past, he regretted his being the cause of recalling it now.

Bailey's dark eyes smiled. He was not conversant with the incident himself, so he said in a chaffing sort of way :

"So you have protected yourself against the 'influence' after all?"

"Something more material than that."

Jimmy's mouth closed up like a trap, and there was an unsmiling look in his eyes which forbade further questioning.

A silence fell. The strange brooding quiet of the place settled down; the curtains stirred no more, though a wind came sighing down the chimney and ended in a moan. Again silence. Bailey fidgeted in his chair, while every now and then he would keep turning his head to peer into the gloom behind.

"Ugh!" he ejaculated. "It gives me the creeps."

Then, as if driven by some irresistible force, he jumped up and stood with his back to the fire, deliberately facing the background, with a shrinking expectancy in his gaze. It was hard to believe that this was the same Bailey who had discoursed on shooting and sport with so much coolness and judgment a short hour before.

"Ha, ha!" roared Jimmy, now thoroughly restored to his humour.

Every man his own paradox? Well, it was true enough. There was Bailey, who had applied himself to a life of hair's-breadth escapes—and the shadows of a room made him fidget.

"I seem to have lost my nerve a bit," was all Bailey said in answer to Jimmy's banter. In his fine dark eyes was the fever light of the tropics where he had spent some years before the war had fetched him back to France.

Old Jimmy pursued the topic further, in his jesting vein. There was Michael, he said, a journalist, secretly aspiring to novel-writing, and with not an atom of romance in his soul.

"Yes, Michael is like me—solid, secure, and with no

damn nonsense about him. It was not his fault that he got into the hottest fighting in France and came out of it with a whole skin and quite a useful decoration. That, because he is merely Michael, who has no sort of use for that sort of thing. And then," Jimmy proceeded, "there is poor old Dick, a fiery seeker of the bubble reputation up to the cannon's mouth——"

"Bubbly, you mean, Jimmy—up to the bottle's brim."

And when he had said it, Michael threw back his head and gave that great laugh of his. Dick termed it "leonine, but mostly asinine"; but they all joined in.

"Dick is badly outed by a stray shot before he gets well into the line, and is condemned to Blighty and a wound stripe. . . . So here we are, all paradoxes of ourselves, and mostly slaves to circumstance."

Thus old Jimmy of the cheery soul, taking his pleasure in a haunted, gloomy hall, poking fun at each in turn and enjoying his own jests immoderately.

In the solid comfort of the alcove, gay with firelight, the night wore pleasantly on. Jimmy's laugh rang out often and again. Endowed with means and a sound digestion, he enjoyed life if ever a man did. It was Bailey who recalled the shadows in the background.

He raised the topic Fear, wondering if ever a man was born without it. "I was horribly afraid in France," he said.

"None of us liked it," Michael broke in abruptly. "But a man funks it, or he doesn't—that's all there is to it."

His simplicity was of the large order; he had a singleness of purpose, untroubled by the promptings which arise from a more complicated attitude towards life than his was.

"Yet there was something in the horror of it that brought me back from France hating my kind. . . . Merely a phase,

and it passes from one," Bailey added with a dreamy look in his eyes.

Michael had no patience with people who had a temperament—'liver,' he called it, being troubled with neither himself. He was curt in his answer:

"Others have had their fits of it; but they squared their account with death and let it rest at that."

Bailey emptied his glass without answering. Suddenly he turned to Jimmy. "Why did the other bloke shoot himself?" he asked, tapping a cigarette on his case.

The frown deepened on Michael's face; it was so like Bailey, he thought, harking back to such a topic as this.

"You mean the cotton-spinner? He was mad, of course. There was a curious lack of motive, as I have told you."

Bailey paused with a match poised in his long lean fingers. "Ah," he murmured, "suicide whilst temporarily insane—what a convenient fiction with which to veil the tragedy of a man's life!"

He stooped and lit his cigarette, then leaned back to watch the smoke wreath upwards.

Jimmy laughed. "Anyhow, as I have told you before, I don't expect a visit from him. He has been comfortably tucked away in his grave these fifty years and more. Then there was Rupert Marley; that belonged to him," and he pointed to the portière above which a steel breast-plate shone in the firelight. An old Cavalier headpiece, tilting jauntily over it, gave the shadow it enclosed a curiously lifelike appearance.

"He too has been sleeping through the centuries in the old family vault below. The Marleys are all good sleepers, and he won't waken—unless he should take it into his head to pay me a visit up these stairs and through the curtain." Old Jimmy laughed again.

Psychical research had always been of interest to Bailey.

He collected data of such phenomena as came his way.

"One jokes about it," he said; "all the same, there are baffling problems to be solved. I should say the old hall is one of them—I'd like to have the solving of its mystery."

"Oh ho!" from Jimmy. "A psychic expert, are you?"

"In a sense—yes. But not a spook-shifter."

"And yet it terrifies you——"

"That is part of its charm," said Bailey with a smile.

Jimmy stared at him in a puzzled way, then shook his head and gave it up. He was sorry, he said, to disappoint Bailey; but there was a singular lack of mystery about the old house. Should anything unusual happen, he would let them know fast enough.

"If you are alive to tell the tale," Michael suggested.

Jimmy chuckled. "And if not, then I'd be leaving you a nice little problem—in the fourth dimension, let us say. For you know, Michael, I'm not the stuff that suicides are made of: no more than you are yourself. . . . You'd follow on, eh?"

"Yes, we'd follow on, each one of us in turn till we laid the ghost—or were laid to earth ourselves."

Jokingly they agreed to keep their watch, should anything happen to old Jimmy.

The wind was rising again. It shrieked down the chimney now, and the portière trembled as though in fear. Jimmy rose, selected a large log of wood, and cast it on the fire. The brightness died for an instant, and the shadows from behind crept forward until the gloom invaded all but Jimmy's chubby, smiling face.

Michael got to his feet and stretched his great frame. The day's hard riding in the keen air, together with the warmth of the fire, were taking their toll of him.

"I'll leave you to it," he said. "It's me for bed, if you don't mind, Jimmy."

Bailey rose and announced a like intention.

"Well, well," murmured old Jimmy, "what is the present generation coming to? Just gone midnight—whisky in the bottle, a log on the fire. And you talk of bed!"

He filled himself a pipe, lit it, and settled down with a sigh of content. Michael and Bailey bade him good-night, but Dick signified his intention of remaining for one pipe more.

"That's right, Dick, old boy; keep the old man company a little longer."

The other two filed out in silence, leaving uncle and nephew together. Jimmy's laugh came echoing down the hall as the two passed out of it.

"Wonderful old boy," Bailey remarked as Michael halted at his bedroom door. "Sitting in that place . . . doesn't know the meaning of fear. . . ."

"Yes. Well, good-night, Bailey. I'm most infernally sleepy."

"I'm glad to get to bed myself. I've got a bit of the old fever on me to-night, I think."

Bailey passed his hand wearily over his face, which was very pale.

"Anything I can do for you, old fellow?"

"Nothing, thanks." And Bailey passed along to his room.

CHAPTER III

I HAVE always watched the friendship of Michael and Dick with peculiar interest ; the two presented so marked a contrast in types. Dick, with his irresistible charm, and Michael with his quiet and forceful calm.

Michael was a big man in every sense of the word. His strong square face was devoid of good looks, but there was something indomitable about its expression, the harshness of it redeemed by a pair of intensely blue eyes which looked at you with so direct a gaze. There was suppressed humour, too, about the resolute mouth.

Dick, on the other hand, was tall and lithe, with a boyishly handsome face, full of fire and vitality. His eyes were a dark hazel, bright and eager, and with a singular mixture of laughter and recklessness in their expression : eyes that could blaze into a temper one instant, and melt again into laughter the next. Possessed of a dash and easy grace, he arrived at excellence without an effort ; while Michael plodded in his wake, never exceeding a mediocrity at games and all that means most to a boy at school. Yet Michael persevered grimly and with a great-heartedness and an admiration which amounted almost to hero-worship. It was touching, too, to note the protective side of his devotion for Dick ; it reminded you somehow of a great St. Bernard keeping faithful watch. And Dick was not slow to avail himself of the other's aid when in a scrape—no rare occurrence with him ; for the rest, his time was too much occupied for him to waste

much of it upon one over whom he maintained so easy a superiority. But all the time Michael would have given the soul out of his body for his friend.

To travel hopefully may be better than to arrive—when you have reached something yourself. But it is not an easy philosophy for the mere traveller, and I have often wondered just how much Stevenson had accomplished himself before arriving at this conclusion. That this was Michael's unconscious creed from the beginning I have little reason to doubt; but as I watched more closely, I gradually became aware of that hidden strength which makes "arrival" inevitable in the end.

Michael himself would be the very last to be aware of any such thing; he was never the man to stop and contemplate himself, or to take any interest in his own possibilities. He just "travelled," cheerfully most of the way, and with a staying power above the ordinary.

On the afternoon of the day on which this story opened, Michael and Dick were riding slowly back after an excellent run with the Blankshire Hounds. Dick pulled up at the gate of the Vicarage.

"Not like the little woman to miss a meet," he remarked. "Besides, she said she would be seeing me there."

"Who?"

"Esmée, of course."

"I have not met the lady," said Michael, "and I have never heard of her before."

"Never—heard—of—her—before! You knew the old vicar had died?"

"But not that the new one had a daughter."

Dick looked at him and laughed. "Well," he drawled, "your education has been neglected. . . . It is time you learned."

They found her seated by the fire and alone, save for

a wire-haired fox-terrier—"Bill"—curled up and fast asleep at her feet. Bill opened one eye; looked bored; gave a grunt that ended in a sigh, then turned and snuggled down to sleep once more. Bill was a dog of one idea—his mistress. He had no regard for others, he simply did not notice them.

"Here's Mickey," said Dick, with an affectionate hand laid on his shoulder.

She welcomed Michael, stealing a look at him under the dark lashes which fringed her eyes. She was sizing him up, rather after the fashion of one man for another, and her verdict was a favourable one. He had the look of a man who could do things and not talk about them.

A faint smile curved her lips as she caught sight of Dick's face. "Why are you late?" she inquired.

"Late!"

"Yes, late for tea. . . . You said you were coming to tea—or perhaps you have forgotten?"

Dick laughed with his eyes. "Aren't girls funny things? Girls *are*, you know, Michael. Never have anything to do with them, my boy."

"I'm not going to," Michael said sturdily, trying to feel at his ease.

She looked at him, then tossed her head as much as to say, "Oh, he's like that, is he?" But aloud:

"Surely you could not be so unkind!"

Yes, she was laughing at him. He had known it all the time, though her face was perfectly grave. 'Do I look as big a fool as all that?' he was asking himself.

I do not mean to say that Michael was shy. He took far too little thought of himself for that. But whereas other women failed to interest him, this one with the secret laughter in her eyes perplexed him. For the first time in his life he had a sense of being cumbersome.

"Don't!" said Dick. "You are frightening him. He

is like that with women. They scare him. . . . Once there was a girl with whom he mustered up courage to dance. He has never got over it—neither has she.”

But Miss Favoril paid no attention to him. “Well,” she pursued, “what have you got to say for yourself, Mr. Frayne? Why are you going to have nothing to do with us poor women?”

He was one of those men whom it is a pleasure to tease, because he would be rather a dear about it. She had found that out at once, and she liked him for it. She waved Dick aside, and the imperious gesture of her little hand was wholly delightful.

“I want to know just why,” she insisted in a sort of coaxing voice she practises when it is her policy to be persuasive. If this fails she looks at you very straight in the face and shakes her little head at you as much as to challenge your ability to oppose her in anything. Self-willed—yes, with that mutinous mouth of hers.

She leaned forward. “Won’t you tell me?” she coaxed.

Dick laughed at that. He got in his word at last. “Tell her, Mickey, and begin at the beginning. Make her a present of your past, old lad.”

“Be quiet, Dick, this instant. . . . Now, Mr. Frayne, I am waiting. I’d simply *adore* to hear.”

Frayne regarded her with a whimsical expression. There was a remote smile on his lips which had strayed there against his will. He was fighting against it, but it broke through as she looked up at him.

“I am sorry,” he said, laughing at last. “I have got no past. And I don’t want a future either.”

Miss Esmée’s eyes screw up adorably when she smiles. It is the sort of smile that begins delightfully in her eyes before it reaches her lips. The most irresistible smile I have ever seen in a woman’s face.

“So that is your reason, it is? There,” she said in an amused voice, a humorous twinkle in her eyes, “it is a good reason, and I won’t tease you any more.”

There was something reassuring about this; and at the same time there was a hint of challenge in the depths of her violet eyes as she nodded her small head at Michael.

“Don’t laugh about it, Esmée,” Dick drawled. “Michael may mistake my solemn warning for a joke. And I mean it earnestly. You see, the trouble with Michael is, that in his heart of hearts he really entertains illusions about women.”

But the girl was paying no attention to this. Tea had arrived in the meantime, and her hands were fluttering daintily about the silver and the porcelain.

Michael sat balancing his cup in one hand, looking big and uncomfortable. As soon as the girl’s attention was diverted he watched her with the large-hearted gentleness and wonderment with which some men regard womenkind. About women in general he did not trouble much, and never had. They frightened him, and when they did not frighten they merely bored.

“Now,” said Dick, “it is my turn.”

He stirred his tea with one hand and helped himself to a sandwich with the other.

Frayne was glad that Dick was now monopolising her attention. He could watch her without being seen: the curve of her cheek and the long eyelashes which shadowed them; the nose just a thought tip-tilted; the sweet, full, sensitive lips and the beautiful rounded chin which could be soft as well as resolute.

His eyes followed her movements as she presided daintily over the tea-table, and with a self-possession that was so childishly natural too. Hers was the vitality of a dynamo; she was so intensely alive as she kept up a running

fire of repartee, striking many a spark in her piquant sallies with Dick.

Women were like that, Michael concluded. Some of them were very wonderful.

The men rose to take their leave. Turning to Michael, she smiled again with that maddening suggestion of hidden laughter from the corner of her eyes.

"You've had no time to spare for women, that's why you don't understand them," she said. Then: "I hope we shall meet again, Mr. Frayne."

Dick laughed. "That's right, Esmée. You must take him in hand. He wants humanising, does old Michael."

Michael squared back his great shoulders. He gazed down upon the absurdity of her with a small, deprecating smile.

Michael was quieter than usual as the two jogged home through the dusk.

For the first time in his life he took the trouble to have a good look at himself. He began to regard his lack of social accomplishment with disfavour. He had never before attempted to conceal his preference for men's society or his avoidance of woman's; but he would have liked it better now had he borne himself less clumsily in Miss Favoril's company instead of giving her cause to laugh at him.

"Damn!" he muttered under his breath, angered that his mind should dwell on such a thing at all. He was plain Michael Frayne with his way to make in the world. Merely Michael; and without a vestige of romance in his composition. Not a thing to worry over, he concluded, beginning to laugh at his own foolishness. He had lived in a world of men and of things; they had more than sufficed in the past, and so they could continue to do in the future.

Presently Dick broke into his thoughts. "She is the *most* adorable thing!" he exclaimed.

And Frayne was again guilty of asking "Who?" for his thoughts by this time had resumed their old contentment—or resignation, whichever you may choose to term it. And that certainly did not include anything feminine within their scope.

"Just the most wonderful," Dick continued his musing, then broke off. "Of course, you don't care for this sort of talk, and you will think me an ass to enthuse. But, old Michael lad, it is worth while living to love a woman like that. . . . Of course, women only bore you."

"Yes," Michael returned slowly, "they do. I don't understand it, of course; but I daresay she is rather different from many of them."

Dick cried: "Different! Why, of course she is. Because there is not another like her in the world of created things. One day you will find one yourself who is different from all the rest, and then——"

But here Michael's laugh rang out, large and hearty as the man himself. "Maybe. Still, I'll never understand them."

"Certainly you won't, my boy. . . . Women are not made to be understood—but to be loved."

"And she loves you?"

"Haven't spoken to her yet. But I'm hoping."

Watching the handsome, boyish face, and the striking grace and ease of him, Michael knew that his friend's success was assured, and he was glad.

"I've got to speak to old Jimmy first," Dick explained, his face clouding over.

Michael grunted. "Nothing to stop you there, old fellow."

"I'm not so sure about that. All I've got in the world I owe to old Jimmy. . . . He is the best old boy in the

world, and has never denied me anything. But there is a streak of hardness too. A man who has battled his own way as he has must have a bit of flint about him somewhere. . . .

"Haven't you seen that for yourself, Mickey? You remember that scrape I got into during our second year at the 'Varsity? Old Jimmy nearly jibbed then—said he would if it ever happened again. And you hewed a way out for me in that calm, solid way of yours——"

"But what has that got to do with it now? Do you mean——"

"Yes," said Dick, the light and laughter gone from his face, "I have got into another mess—a pretty damnable one this time."

He paused a moment and waited; then the appeal in his eyes yielded to a flash of anger. Michael's impassivity and slowness of speech affected him like that at times; he was all nerves and springs himself.

"Oh, don't look so smug about it!" he raged. "It was before Esmée came into my life, and it is only a money difficulty, after all. But," he added, gnawing at his lip, "it is bad enough, in all conscience."

"Tell me," said the other curtly.

And Dick told.

It was the old story—living far beyond the generous allowance his uncle made him. But that was so like Dick, whose need was ever the need of instant things.

I have often thought the fault lay largely with Jimmy himself. He had made a friend of Dick, taking a huge pride in him, but without that touch of discipline which the lad's headstrong nature demanded. Dick was warm-hearted as ever a man was, generous to a fault, and he could have been guided by these qualities he possessed. Be that as it may, it is a fact that Dick had never in his life been made to count the cost of things.

Probably he had never taken the trouble to ascertain how deeply he was in debt—or, for that matter of it, that he was in debt at all—until the bank enlightened him. I can quite picture it all: selling a hunter here, or a polo pony there, and so elated with his economy that he had bought a new car costing more than all of his horse-flesh put together. And so on, in a blissful disregard of the future, until a fresh crop of bills rolled in. The gift of living for the present was his, and he had cultivated it to a nicety. But with all that, as I have said before, he would more than share his last crust with you—he would give it all to you.

“I got into the clutches of a money-lending tout,” he explained to Frayne, “and now I don’t know what to do about it—damned if I do.”

Michael answered firmly: “You can’t straighten the thing out until you face it. . . . There is only one thing to do: make a clean breast of it all, and then tell him of your hopes with regard to Miss Favoril.”

Dick, he felt, so easily put things from him.

Dick gave an odd little laugh. “The only thing!” he echoed. “My dear man, you don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Perhaps not.” Michael was roused for an instant from his customary imperturbability.

“The fact is . . . You see, it is like this. There was a fellow I knew in France. Not the sort of bloke one meets ordinarily about town, but he looked me up in the club one day. It was when I was getting to my wits’ end. He was a smart sort of lad who seemed to be doing uncommonly well, and to know his way about the city—that sort of thing. Well, the long and the short of it is that he told me of an ‘All British Development Company’—a new concern, and he said he could get me in on the ‘ground floor.’ . . . I think that is the precise phrase

he used. Anyhow, it sounded an impressive sort of thing to me."

Dick paused, and then, smiling ruefully: "I only had to pay a shilling in the pound on allotment; and the company would be booming before the first call came along."

Michael groaned. The old flat-trap laid to catch such fools as Dick. He was frowning and wondering why Dick had not come to him about it before, then he recollected how their paths had grown apart after demobilisation, Dick's leading him into a social life of ease and affluence, while his own had been that of toilsome activity.

"H'm!" he snorted.

"What?"

"Nothing. Merely murmuring aloud my thoughts. . . . You amazing ass!" he added, a set look on his face.

"Oh, quite so," Dick agreed affably. "Well, then, you see, I bought all the shares I could at a shilling in the pound."

"You would!"

"I did. And I borrowed to buy more. Then the slump came, and the Development Company went to the devil."

"Of course. . . . The only development it ever contemplated was an early call on that nineteen shillings in the pound."

"However did you guess, Mickey?"

"H'm! The thing was an obvious ramp from the start."

"Do you think it was?"

Michael gave a short laugh. "*Do* I think?" he repeated. "No, I don't. I *know*. . . . Only the few flats could have failed to see that."

Dick's face fell. "Then there is no use holding on?" he questioned. "The shares will never recover?"

"Not a chance of it. Not a ghostly! I'm sorry, old fellow, you've got to face the music now. The only thing left is to make a clean breast of it-all to old Jimmy. He'll come round, I know. He's fond enough of you for that."

Dick walked his horse on for a few paces, and in silence. "But I've not told you all yet," he said at last in a low voice.

Michael stared at him a moment. "Then," he said slowly, "in Heaven's name get to the end of it!"

"I wish to God I had come to you long ago, Mickey. You could have kept me out of this mess."

"I wish to God you had. But you didn't. . . . Well?"

"I had to pay up, you see. So——" Dick hesitated a moment, and when he continued there was a note of shame in his voice. Michael's heart went out to him at that, but there was not a trace of feeling on Michael's face. "So I pledged with that money-lender—my reversionary interest in old Jimmy's estate."

That stirred Michael out of his immobility. "God!" he muttered under his breath. With all his resolution, he would not have cared to have faced Jimmy with a thing like that. It was not so much the vein of hardness he would have feared as the thought of the old fellow's unfailing goodness and generosity. And he knew it was that which smote on Dick's conscience now.

"Whatever am I to do?"

"I don't know," Michael answered, and lapsed into a silence. The truth of it was that for once in his life Michael hesitated, having regard to all the circumstances of the case.

Dick writhed under the silence that had fallen upon

the other. "For God's sake, say something! I can't stand your silence now."

"I really don't know what to say." Michael was frowning.

"It's the devil," Dick assented. "The very devil." They rode on for a while in silence.

Suddenly Dick reined in his horse. "Michael," he cried, "I'll tell him all . . . and I'll tell him at once."

That, too, was like Dick. To make up his mind in a flash about a thing over which he had wavered for days, perhaps, and then to put it into immediate execution. His was not the fortitude that waits to win, but rather the reckless dash that carries all before it where a sheer persistence might stop just short of success.

Gone was all his weakness of the moment before. When Dick spoke like that, Michael knew that he meant it.

"Do you know what I think he will do? . . . He will pay off the score, and cut me adrift. Then it will all come to you. . . . And that's why I don't mind so much, old Mickey."

Michael, frowning to conceal the love in his heart for Dick, muttered: "Don't be more of an ass than you can possibly help. . . . What about Miss Favoril? You are forgetting her. No, don't tell him yet, Dick. We'll find some other way out. Give me a chance to-night to think it over."

Dick shook his head. "Good old lad!" he murmured. "You have never failed me yet. But I have made up my mind this time. I'm for it alright—it is the only clean way out. I'll take what's coming to me. I've earned it, Mickey."

He had cheered up wonderfully now that he was committed to immediate action. The old boyishness had

returned to him and the old gay challenge to Fate was shining in his eyes once more.

Michael's mien was uncompromising as ever, yet there was something about him, all the same, which suggested that protective attitude towards Dick. As a matter of fact, he was mustering all his powers to dissuade the other from his intentions.

"You are forgetting Miss Favoril," he repeated doggedly.

But to this Dick paid little heed. "Not a bit," he answered. "We will clear out to Canada together, or to Rhodesia. Any old place where we can make a fresh start. Old Jimmy hewed out a way for himself. So will I. And I'm not so sure that I've much use for a post-war England these days."

"Yes, but Jimmy did not drag a woman with him through all his hardships."

"You don't know anything about women. They don't stick at anything, once they care for a fellow."

"I should have thought——" Michael began in his slow way, and stopped. It had not occurred to him that a man would avoid anything to make such a woman happy. His knowledge of Dick fell short of a complete understanding.

But an onlooker is able to see more deeply below the surface, and so to focus Cause and Effect in their proper perspective. In Dick I see a man who all his life has been accustomed to service from others; willing service, and even sacrifice which familiarity and a lack of personal vanity (as in Dick's case) took for granted, little thinking of what it cost in the giving. Not selfishness so much as use and custom.

Yet Michael, who would willingly have given his own life for Dick, had to set his teeth to maintain a silence when he thought of what Dick was ready to exact from a

little fragile woman whom it befitted a man to carry over all the rough places.

Returning to Marley House, they found that Bailey had arrived, so Dick's confession was delayed some hours.

CHAPTER IV

MICHAEL was usually one of the soundest of sleepers, but when he got to bed that night he found that sleep had altogether left him.

First it was the wind ; it had risen swiftly and was rattling the windows in their casements like a bundle of old bones. Then it went tearing round the gables, shrieking like a lost soul as it passed, and ending in a moan. Somewhere a long way off a door banged. But it was the windows that brought Michael out of bed ; he could stand the torment of them no longer. He picked up a shoe-horn from the dressing-table and muffled the noise of one of them by wedging it, but the others only seemed to rattle the louder. He stood for a while shivering in the dark, and looked out across the park on which his bedroom fronted.

The clouds were racing across the moon, casting weird shadows about the old house. A tiny lake in the distance shone like silver among the trees, but the loom of the avenue was like a black vault threading its way into the night. The old yew hedge was bending its sable plumes to the gale ; then suddenly the moon was blotted out and there was nothing left but the darkness and the wild sounds of the night.

Michael returned to bed again ; there was warmth there, even though sleep eluded him. He tossed about from side to side. He counted innumerable sheep jumping over endless fences, but sleep had utterly forsaken him.

So he gave it up at last, and let his mind become peopled with other thoughts. He recalled Dick's words as they jogged home from the vicarage together in the waning light, and he lay and wondered what the outcome of it all might be, hoping against hope what all would be well, yet with an unaccountable dread at his heart.

Sleep did not come to him until the early hours of the morning; and when it did he fell into a slumber full of troublous dreams.

The sun was streaming into the window when he was aroused by a hand shaking him roughly by the shoulder. It was Dick who stood at the bedside, a fixed look of horror in his face.

"Michael!" he cried, "Michael!"

And Frayne was up in an instant, flinging the bed-clothes from him and staring at Dick through the sleep in his eyes.

"What is it?"

"Old Jimmy is dead—shot through the head. . . . He is dead, I tell you." And Dick breathed as though he had been running hard.

Michael stood perfectly still, his every movement arrested. "Dead?" he echoed. "Old Jimmy dead? . . . How do you mean—dead?"

He was trying to get a grip of his thoughts, and to focus them on something less abstract, less unthinkable than this; but another glance at Dick's face brought home to him the whole ghastly truth.

And then came the breathless explanation.

Peters had awakened Dick to say that he had been to call the master at seven o'clock as usual. He had knocked at the door and got no answer, turned the handle and found the door locked.

Slipping into some clothes and returning with Peters,

Dick had rapped at the door, and still no answer. At last they had broken their way in, to find the room empty and the bed not slept in. Then it had occurred to Dick that his uncle often sat up reading in the old hall and might have fallen asleep there, so he had questioned Peters. But Peters had not been there to see. The two had then passed down into the hall below. And there they had found old Jimmy, seated in his chair, a Colt pistol on the floor where it had dropped from his dead hand.

"Then," Dick ended in a hoarse whisper, "I locked the hall door behind me and came for you."

"God!" Michael's strong face quivered, and without another word he hurried on with his dressing.

There was a deep silence, while Dick sat watching in a curiously vacant sort of way. Suddenly his face went livid, he swayed a little in his chair; and Michael, who had seen the like once before when Dick had been knocked out at Yprès, crossed to the dressing-table and got out his flask.

"Drink this," he said in his curt way, and poured out a good stiff glass of brandy. "Now tell me," he added slowly, for he knew there was more yet on Dick's mind.

A little colour had returned to Dick's face; he spoke in a dull, quiet voice: "I feel," he said, "that it is I who have been the cause of his death. You know I told him all about it last night. . . . He was dreadfully upset, I could see that. But, Mickey, there was not one word of reproach. That's what made it so much worse for me—that, and the suffering in his kind old face. If it had been a less thing he would have gone for me about it. . . . God! I wish he had. But it was too bad for that; it sort of stunned him at first. His eyes hardened a bit after that—you know the way they had at times. . . .

"'Leave me now,' he said. 'I will think it over and answer you in the morning.' . . . By God, he has!"

"Oh," Dick cried, "that look of disappointment on the old fellow's face! It is haunting me, the way he looked at me first, Mickey, as though hope in life had left him. . . . And this is his answer. This!" His voice choked. He pressed both hands over his eyes.

"None of that, Dick," Michael said sharply, almost roughly. "You have got to keep a stiff upper lip and see this thing through."

He was dressed now. He walked to the door and opened it.

"Come!" he said.

Dick rose slowly to his feet, his eyes meeting those of his friend in a mute appeal. "Where to?" he breathed. But without another word, he followed the other out of the room and down the passage which led to the old wing.

Old Jimmy was in the big chair by the fireplace. His body sagged forward in that sprawling, almost ludicrous attitude of death.

Michael stood staring at him for a moment. He was conversant with death—in France—but the sight of old Jimmy dead, and in such a fashion, that was different. Jimmy, who had been mother and father as well as friend, a man he had loved and looked up to for as far back as he could remember, and to whom he owed all he had in life.

He stood very still with his head bowed. Suddenly he snatched up a white table-cover and shrouded over the poor head so ghastly now in its disfigurement. The Colt lay where it had fallen on the floor, and the dead man's hand hung limply over it.

"God rest his soul!" he said simply, in a low voice.

He glanced at Dick, and the next moment had gripped him firmly by the arm.

"Dick, old boy," he muttered, "remember—a stiff

upper lip. It is a big thing we have got to face, both of us."

He turned at the sound of a soft footfall. It was Peters, who had approached silently from behind, the perfect impassivity of his countenance unchanged, as if the muscles of his face had attained such a perfect rigidity through the years of servitude as to render impossible the slightest variation of expression even on the Day of Judgment.

Bailey, who had come up behind Peters, said very softly: "I have just been told about it." There was a shrinking horror in his eyes as they rested on the shrouded figure. "It is awful," he murmured, moistening his lips with his tongue. "Awful!"

A silence fell—a curious, waiting silence while no one stirred. Peters cleared his throat as though to speak, but he did not look up. He had a watchful way of glancing from the corner of his eyes, even when his gaze was directed on the ground.

It was Frayne who made the first move. But he hesitated a moment, looking at Dick before finally taking over charge.

"Peters," he said, his mind made up, "go at once, please, and ring up the police. Has the doctor been sent for? Well, then, telephone to him as well, and acquaint him of what has happened, and ask him to come along at once. . . . You understand, Peters?"

"Yes, sir." And with one more sidelong glance at the body of his late master, Peters vanished.

Dick Marley, aroused as one awakening from a dream, moved towards the pistol and stooped to pick it up.

"Don't!" cried Frayne, and the other asked what he meant. "Because nothing must be moved until the police have seen it. I mean just that, Dick."

"But it is suicide. There can be no question of—anything else. . . . What are you thinking of?"

"Nothing. . . . Only everything must be left just as it is."

The portière swayed forward and caught Frayne's eye. He stepped across and pulled it back, peering into the conservatory below. The door, he saw, was open. Then he remembered the lock was with the carpenter for repairs.

"We must have that lock replaced at once," he remarked. He caught a glimpse of Dick's face and added more gently: "Will you go and see about it now, Dick? Get a wedge or something to close it with in the meantime, and send down for the carpenter. . . . And just see if Peters has done what he was told."

Anything, he felt, to give Dick something to do and keep his mind occupied.

"Very well." And Dick turned to go.

"I'll come with you," said Bailey, and at that Dick halted.

"Do you mind?" he queried.

"Mind what?"

"Being left—like this?"

"Alone? . . . No," Michael answered slowly. "I will wait here until you come back. But you had better have some breakfast first, and after that you can relieve me."

As he moved off, Bailey shot a glance behind him in that quick, nervous way he had. Then the door closed, and a great silence fell upon the old hall. There was no wind, just a dead calm morning following on the night's storm.

Michael, as he told me afterwards, had never before in his life felt so much alone as he did at that moment. Even in broad daylight the brooding gloom of the place descended like a pall. And in the silence he caught himself listening—for what he knew not.

It was partly the strain of inaction which led him to

investigate, but with caution, so that nothing might be disturbed. And all the time he vaguely sensed a force that seemed to be directing his every action.

He remembered the secret panel in which the pistol had been kept, and he moved across the alcove to examine it. After some searching he found the spring and pressed it. The cavity in which the pistol had lain was empty. He thought of the dead fingers that had last rested there, and suddenly he shot back the panel into place ; but as he did so a ray of sunshine fell on the wood directly, and something caught his eye, causing him to stoop and examine the surface of the wood more carefully.

Yes, without a doubt there was an indentation where the wood had been pressed by some sharp instrument, and recently. There were other marks too, and over a fairly large surface. How were they come by ? he wondered. Someone knowing the secret of the spring, but blinded by the stress of a strong emotion ? Or someone aware of the spring's existence but not quite familiar with its actual position ? His attention became concentrated on the question to the exclusion of all else. He had that power of detachment which is the strength of the strong, that quality which can brush aside all other issues and concentrate solely on essentials when the time for action has come, a power latent in the man, and one which the war had developed to its full and which had been responsible for his rapid promotion to command in the field.

"Now, that's funny," he said, arguing it over with himself. It set his mind running on a new train of thought, while little dreaming of the road he would have to travel before he should arrive at the end of all his wondering.

There were, he concluded, signs of a frenzied hurry on the panelling. And thinking of James Marley as he knew him, the question kept recurring : Could such a man commit suicide under any circumstance whatsoever

—a born fighter to the last ditch? It is inconceivable, he said to himself. And even if Marley could be brought to such a pass, Michael knew him well enough to realise that he would have set about it with the utmost calm and deliberation. No temporary insanity about old Jimmy, and no fumbling for a spring he knew the secret of.

Then——? It must have been the work of one whose design it was to give the semblance of suicide to murder. As he reached this point in his chain of reasoning, a great anger seized upon him.

“Suicide!” he muttered aloud. “Jim Marley’s way was never the coward’s way.” It was treachery even to think it of him. Murder, that’s what it was. And there in the presence of the dead he registered his vow to carry on until the mystery should be solved, and the name of his dead friend cleared. His thoughts went back to the talk of the night before, and in particular to those joking words of old Jimmy: “And if not . . . you’d follow on?” Whether in jest or earnest, and whatever the agency of death might be, they were pledged—all three—to carry on.

Michael was a journalist by profession, and all his instincts of inquiry were aroused. He examined the ground carefully; but there was nothing within the alcove or in the hall itself to reward his search. He descended the short flight of stone steps to the conservatory below.

It had been a north-easterly gale that had sprung up the night before. It was still bitterly cold; snow had fallen and frost had crisped it over when the wind fell. The door, which was slightly ajar, had jammed on some unevenness of the floor, so that the wind could not thrust it further open. The Chubb lock had been removed for repairs. So that was all there was to be found there.

He passed out into the shrubbery of yew trees, centuries

old, draped now in a mantle of white with a margin of green appearing wherever the overhanging branches afforded shelter. No footprints there ; but as he returned to retrace his steps, something small and white lying on a patch of green caught his eyes. He picked it up and found a half-smoked cigarette.

Michael examined it closely : the paper was quite fresh ; plainly it must have come there after the moisture-laden branches were frozen dry. There was the maker's name on it ; it was an Italian brand and one not seen in England.

It was an old fad of Dick's, the importation of new and strange cigarettes, and the subsequent infliction of them upon his friends while he himself passed on to some still more novel brand. But this particular cigarette was of a make which Michael could not recollect having seen Dick smoke so far. What instinct moved him at the time, he could never tell ; but without another thought, he slipped the half-smoked cigarette into his pocket, casting a swift glance round him as he did so.

There was no one in sight, yet he could not rid himself of the furtive feeling his action had engendered.

Probably, he surmised, the cigarette had been dropped by the carpenter, who was of Italian origin—at least, if his name went for anything. But could it be so ? The cigarette showed no signs of moisture, and there had been a rain preceding the snow after the carpenter had finished his work and left for the night. He was glad now that the cigarette was in his pocket, and safe from prying eyes ; and as he remounted the steps into the old hall, the dread in his heart deepened and assumed a more concrete shape and form. If, he concluded, the theory of suicide was rejected, the alternative was—one of murder. Dick was the last person known to have seen Jim Marley alive ;

there was motive enough, too, should everything come to light, as now seemed certain.

But here Michael called a halt on his thoughts, though with something of an effort. "Pshaw!" he muttered, frowning to himself, "I am growing imaginative and nervy."

CHAPTER V

RETURNING to the old hall, Michael walked to the window and looked out, his mind busy with thoughts of the tragedy, and an ever deepening sense of oppression taking hold of him. Presently he heard footsteps approaching; the door opened and Dick appeared, followed by Bailey and one whose face Michael had not seen before.

“Michael,” said Dick, “this is Dr. Capper. I don’t think you have met before.”

The doctor shook hands in a fussy, pompous sort of way. “I am a newcomer to Marley Pryors,” he explained.

Then Michael remembered that the old doctor he had known there, with his old-fashioned remedies and his old-fashioned courtesy, had gone to his last account. The new world against the old, he thought, as he summed up Capper—a fussy efficiency against the old-world ease and dignity.

Dr. Capper was a man of round stature, with a large head set far back on his neck like a vulture’s. He wore a black overcoat, black tie, and spectacles, through the unusually thick glasses of which his cold green eyes fastened on Michael like a pair of large and over-ripe gooseberries. He was a small man with a minute mind and a large notion of his own importance. And without further ceremony he proceeded to uncover the poor still figure of Death.

There was something in his manner of doing it that caused Michael to bite his lips and turn away. Old Jimmy

to be subjected to such a handling, much as though he were an anatomical specimen! The sordid aspect of it filled Michael with a sort of fury, directed in particular against the small man of science so full of his own importance.

"H'm . . . h'm!" the doctor exclaimed, clearing his throat in an irritating way he had, and which further increased the natural antipathy he had already aroused.

"You see," he proceeded didactically, as though he were addressing a class of students, "you see how curiously far back the wound is situated on the cranium." And he touched, in his ghoulish way, the red, gaping hole in poor old Jimmy's skull. "And you will note also, gentlemen," he went on with much pomposity, "the awkward angle at which the pistol must have been held for the bullet to trace this line through the brain and to emerge here." With a singular lack of delicacy, he turned the head to one side to indicate the spot.

"Now I have seen more than one suicide by shooting in my time," said the doctor, striking an attitude by resting a hand on his hips and perking his head at his audience. "The method most commonly adopted is that of resting the barrel close behind the ear; or against the temple; or, again, by thrusting the muzzle into the mouth. An easy, natural position like any of these"—each one of which he had further elucidated by a pantomimic accompaniment. "But this is different. . . . Yes, gentlemen, I should say that this is not a case of suicide at all."

He paused to give full effect to his dictum, while he subjected each of the men in turn to a glitter from his spectacles.

"It is just possible," he pursued, "that such a bullet wound could have been self-inflicted by an unnatural straining of the muscles of the arm and neck. But it would be wholly unnatural—so unlikely, in fact, that I

should have no hesitation in looking for the cause of death to a hand other than that of our poor dead friend here.

"Now we will see what more the body has to tell us. Of course the post-mortem will follow later, but in the meantime we shall—h'm, h'm—see what we shall see, and without unduly disturbing anything before the police arrive upon the scene. Nothing disturbed up to now?" he demanded abruptly. "Very well. Ha, h'm! . . .

"The first thing we notice is the position of the right hand above the pistol. Assuming that the deceased had placed himself in such a strained position as to be able to fire the pistol at this unusual angle, then his arm would never have fallen back again into its present position of rest. . . . And then the pistol itself must have landed some way behind its present situation on the floor."

He was kneeling on the ground as he spoke, peering up at the body from all angles, making measurements with a tape he had produced from his pocket, and comparing relative positions. Suddenly he drew himself up, directed a gaze of ill-concealed suspicion on each of the men in turn, and delivered himself thus:

"Murder, that's what it is. Nothing short of murder. And murder is what I shall maintain it to be through thick and thin, in face of any theory of suicide, or such fiddle-faddle as may be adduced by anyone."

So saying, he pulled out a little note-book as black and bloated as himself, wherein he proceeded to enter up his notes. He closed it with a most aggressive snap, then surveyed the three men before him as though calculating the "drop" required by each.

"Good-morning," he said. "We shall meet again shortly. . . . And nothing must be disturbed until the police have made their investigations. . . . Ha, h'm!" and he was gone at a brisk gait from the room.

"Little beast!" Michael exclaimed.

Still, there was no denying the mental acumen of the little man, nor the determination to maintain his own opinion, just because it was his own. Certainly a man who could carry no small weight with a jury, Michael thought, judging from experience gained in the course of his journalistic work; and he wondered how a man whose manner spoke rather of a rough practice in the East End of London should have drifted into the by-waters of a sleepy old village like Marley Pryors.

Shortly after the doctor's departure the village constable arrived, and was left in charge. Bailey set out for a walk in the park, while Frayne followed Dick, who had gone to his room.

Dick was staring out of the window in blank misery when Michael entered his room. "My God," he cried, "if only I knew he had died forgiving me! . . . But this is too awful, Mickey."

Then he set to and paced the floor, up and down, up and down, and the quivering of his face showed something of what he was passing through. He smoked incessantly, lighting one cigarette after another and casting them from him before they were half smoked. They left a curious pungent fragrance in the room, and Michael asked where they had come from.

"Italy. Why?"

"They smell to heaven, old boy," the other answered with a levity in his voice that sounded forced to himself.

"They smoke alright," Dick responded gloomily. "Try one. You will find the case over there by the mantelpiece."

Michael crossed the room. He opened the box indicated in his slow, deliberate way and took out a cigarette, keeping his back turned to Dick as he did so. There was a tightening of the muscles about his mouth when he

read the name and knew it to be the same as that on the half-smoked cigarette he had just picked up in the shrubbery. He thought for a moment, then turned on his heel and walked to the window. It gained him time for reflection.

"Well, what do you think of them?"

"Awful."

Michael had his back still turned to Dick. He felt the mystery thickening around him; his mind was groping in a darkness peopled with suspicions which kept thrusting forward, and which he would not acknowledge even to himself.

There followed a silence. Then suddenly he turned and glanced at Dick—old Dick whom he had known all his life and loved for his hot-tempered faults and his weaknesses, as for his generosity and charm. Dick's eyes met his with the same frank fearlessness as ever, and the darkness lifted from Michael's mind.

"Well?" impatiently. "What is it? I always know it means something when you look at me like that. I know that old dour stare of yours."

"Nothing. It was only these cigarettes of yours. Slow poison, that's what they are. . . . But tell me, Dick," he said, "all that passed between you and old Jimmy last night. I feel I'd like to know. And it may help you, though it may hurt in the telling."

Dick seated himself on the bed, his hands clenched, his eyes on the ground. A minute or two passed, then he began in a voice that wavered now and then:

"There is not much I haven't told you of already. . . . Old Jimmy began by saying there was something he wished to talk over with me, and was glad of having the present opportunity. This was before I got a word in of what I had to tell him. I had to wait for that till afterwards. . . .

“He left me for a moment while he went up to his room for some papers in the safe which stands near the bed. It turned out to be the draft codicil of a will, and he wanted to ask my opinion on certain changes he contemplated. You remember di Conti died about a year ago, and shortly after that his only son died in the war. The provision made for that old scoundrel and his son was a fine bit of generosity on Jimmy’s part after the treatment he had received at their hands and the threats they had kept on hurling at him for years past. But now that both were dead he was making up his mind to disinherit any heir or heirs more remote. And in the past year he had had more than enough provocation for that. Only in that dear intimate way of his he thought he would like to talk it over with me first. It made it all the harder for me, Mickey. All the same, I managed to stick to it, and I told him of the terrible mess I had landed myself in—and all about it. . . .

“For a bit he sat quite silent ; then he picked up his will. ‘I have a mind to change it at once after this,’ he said. I thought then that my surmise was correct, that he was going to disinherit me. And upon my soul I was glad, Mickey, for somehow it made me feel a shade less mean. But no, for he continued : ‘I think now that I shall have to tie up your portion in such a way as will prevent you from squandering it all when I am gone. I am sorry, Dick. . . . But there, leave me now ; I will tell you of my decision in the morning.’ That was all, Michael, save for the look on his face which was worse than anything else. . . .

“I said good-night, but he made no answer. So I left him seated in the alcove, staring into the fire. And that was the last I saw of him until this morning.”

Frayne’s face was very grave when Dick had finished. There was a grim look about his lips as he made some

excuse and left the room. On his return he found Dick standing near the window, examining a pistol in the light.

"What are you doing with that, Dick?" he demanded.

Dick gave an odd little laugh. "I am not going to do away with myself, if that's what you mean. I was seeing if the pistol was alright. It was the one I had with me in France. It had rusted badly and I had sent it to be overhauled. It only came back from the gunsmith's yesterday. . . ." A sigh escaped him. "It is a Colt, too. . . . Old Jimmy gave it to me when I left for France. I think he bought one for himself at the same time. The one that he——"

But Michael interrupted with a frown. "Well, don't leave it lying about. Better give it to me to look after for you."

The other caught fire at that. "My dear Mickey," he drawled, in a manner forecasting a storm, "don't be quite such a damned ass. I am not going to shoot myself, I tell you. Though the good God knows it is what I'd like to do well enough. But there is Esmée, for one thing. . . . I shall speak to her some day soon—I must."

Yes, there was Esmée. But it looked to Michael as if that 'some day' were not so near as poor Dick imagined.

It is a strange thing how, when a deadly peril arises, the person most endangered by it is often the last to be conscious of it.

"All the same, please let me keep it for you, Dick," said Michael.

But Dick flung back his head defiantly. "No," he answered.

Michael's firm jaw grew firmer; he would have his way, with or without Dick's consent. But as he came to this decision, the uselessness of such a course occurred to him. It would not be long before the gunsmith's book disclosed all he tried to conceal, and the mere attempt

at concealment would only make it so much the worse—if it were ever to come to that.

“Is it clean now?” he asked, taking it up and looking down the barrel to satisfy himself of that. “Well, don’t go about with it loaded, that’s all I ask.”

But Michael’s heart was heavy as lead. The net of circumstances was drawing closer, and he was resolved to put into immediate action a suggestion that had recurred to him more than once since that terrible awakening.

CHAPTER VI

IT was early forenoon. The sky was a cold blue, dotted here and there with fleecy clouds floating like round white balls of wool. The tree-tops shone rosily in the morning sun.

Michael set out at a rapid pace ; he was making for the village to send off a telegram which he wished to despatch himself. He had need of a walk, too, to think things over and to arrive at a clearer perspective. The exquisite freshness of the morning air made the mere act of living a joy ; but the faster he went the more thickly did the cloud of depression settle down upon him.

He branched off from the main road on a short cut to the village. It was a forest path, dim and full of shadows where the morning sun had not touched it. But even in the shade there was a growing softness in the air. A thaw had set in, and the thin coating of snow was rapidly clearing off ; the frost had gone out of the ground. There would be rain again before night, Michael reflected, sensing the dampness in the air.

The world was very still ; moisture from the trees fell with a melancholy drip-drip on the soft powdery soil underneath. There was not a breath of air within the forest. Smoke from a distant clearing lay in long straight streamers at the height of a man's head from the ground, the greyness of it turning to a powder-blue against the green of the pines wherever the sunshine came slanting through them.

But Michael walked swiftly on, conscious of none of it, and still wrestling with the grim foreboding which invaded his thoughts. He was approaching the main road which led into Marley Pryors, when the muffled sound of a horse's feet beating on the turf behind brought him to a standstill. He wheeled round to listen, and presently there appeared the figure of a girl on horseback, cantering up the glade.

The figure was rapidly overtaking him ; there was no avoiding it, and Michael's frown deepened. He had no wish to have a woman breaking in on his thoughts ; nor was he in the mood for polite persiflage with any girl.

A small gloved hand waved a hunting-crop in greeting, and a moment later she had pulled up her horse alongside.

"Well, Mr. Frayne." Her voice challenged him, and there was a hidden laughter in it, as though such men as Michael afforded her some infinite quiet amusement.

The sunlight gleamed on her dark hair, crowned by a wide-brimmed hunting hat ; there was an engaging frankness about the girl's face, its round childishness at variance with the wilful little chin. And her eyes—well, they were eyes which could put a spell on you even if you were a woman.

"Good-morning," he said, a gruffness in his voice. He kept pace with her as her horse moved on at a walk. He was at a loss what to say. "Been out riding ? " he asked, after a silence.

She smiled down at him coolly, regarding him from the corner of her eyes. "Of course," she said. Then noting his troubled frown, her face grew grave. "Where is Dick this morning ? " she asked suddenly.

Michael took his time to consider the situation. He was a reserved man, especially where women were concerned, and it was hard for him to tell her of the tragedy that had happened. But she ought to know—would

know sooner or later. Perhaps he had better get it over at once. He still hesitated.

They were passing the constable's cottage, where a knot of women were gathered together in the trim little front garden, talking.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Stubbs ; you are having a nice little gossip, I see. So early in the morning, too !" And Miss Favoril addressed the constable's wife in that tone of easy banter and gaiety which was peculiarly her own.

"Dearie me, miss, and have you not heard ? " returned the old dame, hastening to the gate with a triumph in her eyes, and her voice lowered to suit the solemnity of the occasion.

But Michael intercepted her : "Don't stop to listen, Miss Favoril." He spoke in a low voice, but his words were nothing less than a command, his awkwardness slipping from him like an ill-fitting mask.

"Keep your horse at a walk. I'll tell you about it as soon as we get out of earshot. Come . . ." he said curtly.

Miss Favoril turned to Mrs. Stubbs. "Not this morning, thanks," she said with a friendly nod and a smile, and the constable's wife had to smile back and retire, hiding her discomfiture with the best grace she could muster.

Then Miss Favoril, leaning forward a little, studied Michael's face more closely. The laughter had died out of her eyes.

"Well ? " she said, when they had progressed a few yards. "I am waiting for an explanation, Mr. Frayne." And she spoke a little coldly.

So he told her what had happened in the old hall, breaking it to her as gently as might be, but without a trace of feeling. There may have been the 'thousandth man' to whom he could have shown his feelings ; but certainly not to a woman and a stranger.

"Oh, I cannot believe it !" she cried, then fell very

silent for a while. "And Dick—how dreadfully he will be feeling it. . . . I must go to him. . . ." Her voice was vibrant with feeling, and there was a shadow of contempt in the glance she rested on the cold mask with which Michael hid all traces of emotion.

"Do you know," she added presently. "I don't believe Mr. Marley could commit suicide. No, he simply couldn't," and she gave a little shiver. "Everyone loved him—he was such a dear. . . . What do you make of it, Mr. Frayne?"

"I really don't know what to think. It is all so very horrible."

She reined in her horse at the vicarage gate. "I wish there was something I could do to help. But you know how sorry I am."

He nodded.

"And I will help," she went on. "I am not such a little fool as you think, Mr. Frayne. Truly I am not." And she was gone before he could make reply.

The sky grew overcast. Rain began to fall by the time Michael got back to Marley.

CHAPTER VII

I SHOULD like to mention here that Michael had chosen journalism as a profession on leaving the 'Varsity. The war had interrupted his work, but he returned to it in preference to the military career which his good work in France had opened out to him ; largely, I fancy, because he had set his hand to the other, for he is one of these men who must see a thing through once he has started it.

Slowly, doggedly, he was engaged now in forcing his way to the front rank with an imperturbable calm that was backed by a belief in his own powers. The little that he was beginning to make at his work would not have sufficed even for his simple tastes, had it not been for the generous allowance which had to be almost thrust upon him by Jim Marley, who had brought him up since early boyhood. And, as it turned out, Marley had left an ample provision in his will for Michael Frayne, the motherless son of a dead friend.

It was with a view to helping Michael in the course of his journalistic work that I had first introduced him to Robert M'Kerrel, of Scotland Yard, a man I have known and admired over a long stretch of years. Despite their disparity in years, the two had struck a chord in common, and an acquaintanceship sprang up which fast ripened into friendship. Then the war had been the cause of further cementing the tie between the two men. For M'Kerrel had a son in Michael's platoon—excellent lad he was, too, and one of whom his father was justly proud.

Well, Michael had managed to get the youngster out of an exceedingly tight corner—or it pleases old M’Kerrel to think so, if Michael’s version of the fighting is to be preferred. And M’Kerrel is not the man to forget.

Old Bob M’Kerrel, we have been friends for long, you and I, and each year has drawn us closer. At each sight of your broad honest face I arrive at a juster appreciation of the finer shades and subtleties of a character that is as a finely-tempered steel inlaid with gold.

M’Kerrel long ago told me the simple story of his life, and I have since journeyed with him to the croft in the Outer Hebrides where his early life was spent. Destined for the ministry, by which I mean the Free Kirk of Scotland, the money required for his college course was raised through the joint efforts of the family, the brothers by their manual labour and the girls by going into service. Nothing unusual about that, but rather a time-honoured custom of the country, fostered by the ambition to see one of the sons in the pulpit. Robert had the brains of the family, and the choice happened on him; that was all, and nothing more to be said about it. After a brilliant career at college, he was faced with the crisis of his life. The ‘call’ had not come to him in the spiritual sense of the word, for there were certain doctrines of the Kirk to which he could not honestly subscribe, and his was too profoundly sincere a nature to conceal the fact. There was nothing left for him but to renounce all thought of the Church; yet I can well imagine the struggle between conscience and sentiment which his strong soul must have endured before he had to disclose the truth to the members of his family who had pinned their hopes on him. But he went through with it, witnessing their anger and disappointment and finally their repudiation of him, before setting out to carve a career for himself in his dour determination to repay them in the end. How he first took to

writing, failed and failed again ; how he drifted into the police force and hewed his way from the bottom rung to the position he now holds, would suffice to fill a book in itself.

And now, as I write, he is nearing the top of the tree. Honours await him in the near future, but plain Bob M'Kerrel he will ever remain in his own simple estimation. He has vindicated himself many times over in a worldly sense, and has repaid his family tenfold in a monetary one. So at last they have taken him back, though grudgingly, and with a backward glance of regret at the ministry lost to them in him. Year after year he spends a portion of his holidays in a croft of his own, coat off and working with the best of them. And despite the fame and the position he has won for himself, I verily believe there are no happier hours than these in his life. I have put it to him, but he only laughs and shakes his head. But I have journeyed with him to his home ; I have watched him at work and I know.

So much, then, for the record of Robert M'Kerrel, and if I have digressed unduly it is because I would have you know what manner of man he is. But to return :

It had come as a sudden inspiration to Michael to telegraph to M'Kerrel. He saw they were only at the beginning of a big thing, and in his trouble he felt the need of such a friend. It was fortunate, too, that he telegraphed when he did, for M'Kerrel happened to be in the Yard at the time and free to take a run down to Marley himself, instead of deputing a junior, as would otherwise have been the case.

"Had you delayed," he remarked later to Michael, when they were alone together, "it would have been too late, as it turned out. A big case came in after I left the Yard for the station. I doubt if I would have been at

liberty to come to you had I not got away in the nick of time. Now I'm here I can have a good look round before returning. And then I'll send you down the best man we've got to carry on."

"That was a lucky shot of mine. It was very good of you to come yourself, Mac. I realised how much I was asking of you at the time. . . . But I can't explain—it came over me in a flash that it was the thing to do, and I did it. I felt I just had to know what you thought of it all at first-hand. And yet I am not fanciful as a rule. Everyone says I have no imagination, and they are right, of course."

M'Kerrel laughed. "There is such a thing as *flair*—whatever that may be. Anyhow, it is no bad substitute. Man," he said in his dry way and lapsing familiarly into his mother tongue, "you have got a common-sense, reasoning mind. The natural sequence of cause and effect comes to you of its own accord ; you would be nothing of a journalist had you not got that. Imagination may enable a man's mind to leap several steps in advance of yours, but as often as not it confuses issues and diverts from essentials."

The theorising of these two, dealing chiefly with criminology and incentives at work in the human mind in general, has always been of interest to me as being that of men of a sound, practical mind by nature. Then he has a pawky way of putting things, has old M'Kerrel. His iron-grey, shaggy brows give his eyes that skye-terrier look, and his honest eyes twinkle humorously at you from underneath.

M'Kerrel had arrived at Marley early in the afternoon. "Mr. Frayne and I have met before," was all he said, and Michael left it at that. The other two had no inclination to re-visit the scene of the tragedy, so it fell to Michael's lot to accompany his friend alone.

There was a Celtic strain of sensitiveness about M'Kerrel which all his service in the detection of crime could not obliterate ; the way in which he touched the dead was an evidence of this, and all the more when compared with the doctor's handling. He was not long over his task, but seemed to take in the whole situation at a glance. Michael showed him the secret panel, pointing out the marks on the wood, and M'Kerrel agreed at the conclusions arrived at.

"We may be able to obtain some finger-prints here," he observed.

Then Michael had to confess, to his own mortification, that he had been fingering it since. "Confusing the issues, as you might say."

"Eh, man, but that's a pity." M'Kerrel's speech broadened out. "Never mind," he added, with a kindly glance at his friend's face. "We'll have a good look round, and maybe we'll come on something yet."

When he came to the pistol he drew a piece of chalk from his pocket, and kneeling on the ground, he carefully marked the position. Then he picked up the weapon and examined it closely.

"A '380 Colt," he observed. "And one cartridge missing from the magazine. . . . The barrel recently fired through," holding it to the light and squinting through it.

He carefully replaced the pistol in its place and stood up, shifting from one place to another so that he might sum up the situation from various angles of vision, and measure relative positions with his eye.

"Aye," he mused, half to himself, "yon doctor-man is no far wrong. I'll be thinking the same thing myself—that it is just murder and nought else."

Then, aware of the question forming on Michael's lips, he continued, his broad Doric dropping from him like a glove :

"I met the doctor on my way up, and he gave me the outline of the case as far as it went. I knew him when he practised in the East End of London, and this is not his first connection with a murder case by a long way. The East End is more in his line than a country practice ; he came here for his health, so he tells me—and between you and me, there may be truth enough in that, for he has been making a hot corner for himself here and there with his meddling ways. Talk of a hanging judge—well, that's a hanging doctor, if you like. For he is out to hang anyone so long as his own deductions are proved correct ; and I am bound to say that his theory is seldom at fault. Mention the word 'suicide' and he will bark at you. But now let us see all we can before it gets too dark."

M'Kerrel examined the alcove carefully, stopping for a moment at the portière, and peering through it to the conservatory, below. Next he moved slowly across the hall, his glance travelling round the walls at some height from the floor. He was speaking his thoughts aloud :

"The murderer used his own pistol. He crept up and overpowered his man from behind. . . . Then he fetched the other pistol from the secret panel, and placed it on the floor. But, man, he did not choose the right position. . . . Before placing it, he must have fired a shot to foul the barrel, supposing the pistol was clean, as it must have been. Then there should be the mark of the bullet. . . . Ah," and he pulled aside a curtain from one of the tall narrow windows and pointed to one of the diamond panes that was missing.

"That's it, is it? He broke it clean away and fired into the open. Do you happen to know if this pane was missing before? "

"I cannot say. All the curtains were drawn last night."

“And did no one in the house hear the sound of a shot ? ”

“No. I have asked all the servants the same question. I was awake for a long time myself and heard nothing but the wind. It was blowing half a gale, and the old wing is well removed from the rest of the house, as you can see.”

“And who knew of this secret panel besides the deceased ? ”

Michael considered the question carefully, then replied : “I cannot tell, of course, all who were aware of it. The village carpenter for one, probably, as the lining of the cupboard is of recent origin. And I have a theory about that which I want to tell you of after you have finished your inspection. . . . It will soon be dark.”

The other eyed him keenly for an instant. “Yes,” he agreed, “let us get through with it. After that, friend Michael, you will tell me just what is in your mind.”

He returned to the alcove, busying himself with his note-book ; and Michael could see he was making a sketch of things. That done, he descended into the conservatory and out by the door and into the shrubbery in the midst of which the old family vault stood.

The thaw was complete, though the rain had now eased off into a drizzle. There was no trace of snow left save for a few small patches of white, and the yew branches dripped sadly as the damp breeze shook them. M’Kerrel examined the ground with minute care.

“Nothing here,” he muttered.

“No foot-marks after last night’s touch of frost.”

“You had a look round this morning before the rain ? ”

“Yes,” said Michael, moving off towards the door.

M’Kerrel next turned his attention to the conservatory, and in particular to the stone staircase which led to the fatal room above, examining each step in detail with a

small torchlight he had with him. He no longer spoke his thoughts aloud. As they re-entered, Michael wedged the door shut behind them, mentioning that the lock was with the carpenter for repairs—a fact of which M'Kerrel seemed to take small note.

“Well,” he said, as they stood in the old hall once more, “there is not much more we can do here to-night. I confess myself baffled. The solution is not going to be so simple as I had thought at first. I am glad you sent the telegram which brought me here, Michael, because it is the occasion of seeing you again—perhaps, too, of being of some small assistance to you before we are through with it. And also because of the curious interest of the case itself. . . .

“The murderer ought to have entered by the conservatory door, and up these stairs. Every probability points to that. Look here,” and he pointed to the buttress wall; “he had simply to creep quietly round this, and through the curtain without being seen; then to press the pistol against his victim’s head. You see, the deceased’s back is turned to anyone who would be coming round the corner; and that, again, coincides with the angle at which the pistol must have been held, the point of entry being far back on the head, as the doctor remarked.

“And yet,” he pursued, his bushy, iron-grey eyebrows meeting in a frown, “the murderer has left not a single trace behind him—either of his entrance or of his exit. Curious, that! It is during the get-away that the careful criminal most often leaves a clue—something dropped, something moved and not replaced. And in murder you are most often dealing with the amateur in crime, a sudden murderous instinct followed by a terror of the deed when a man is not the master of his actions. But here he has covered up his tracks. That is what leads me to think it must be one of these systematised crimes carefully

planned beforehand ; or else it must be the work of a madman—and such cases, as you know, are always the most difficult of detection. . . . You went over the ground carefully before I came ? And you found—nothing ? ”

Frayne thought for a moment before answering. “Nothing,” he said at last, “to throw a gleam of light upon the case.”

M’Kerrel shot another searching glance at his friend. His lips moved as though he would speak ; but, instead, he turned in silence and passed within the alcove.

There was a heap of ashes fallen from the grate. M’Kerrel stooped and commenced patiently raking in it with his finger.

“Paper ash,” he muttered, continuing to work his way methodically through the heap. Near the foot of it his search was rewarded by two small unburnt fragments. Both were of stout parchment paper ; one of them was blank, but on the other was the portion of a word, ‘queath.’

“That is all there is,” said M’Kerrel, “but it is worth keeping.”

He placed it carefully within a fold of his pocket-book and turned to go.

The sky had clouded over. The room was growing darker. Shadows crept up in that curious way they had in the old hall, as though they crowded in to listen. Once on his way to the door M’Kerrel threw that swift, almost involuntary glance behind him, as though the place had left its impression on his mind—that awareness of what had been, and was to be.

CHAPTER VIII

PETERS was serving tea when Frayne and M'Kerrel joined the others. Shortly after that, M'Kerrel questioned the servants, and when he returned all four sat round the fire for a while and talked.

Michael said, turning to Dick: "I think it would be as well now if you told M'Kerrel certain incidents in the past life of Jim Marley, for they seem to me to have a distinct bearing on the case."

They were seated in the dining-room round the table where they had gathered the night before. And strange it was to be gathered there again, this time to solve the mystery of one who had been the life and soul of the party only the night before. M'Kerrel was seated in the chair which poor old Jimmy had occupied, with Michael on one side of him and Dick on the other.

"Phew! it's a cold night," said Bailey, moving his chair up to the fire and holding out his hands to the blaze.

"Fever coming back?" Dick queried.

"Probably," said Bailey, leaning back and staring into the flames.

Dick opened his cigarette-case and handed it to M'Kerrel, who shook his head. "If you don't mind, I'll stick to the pipe," he replied with his slow smile.

"Well," Dick began, "I think Frayne is right, Mr. M'Kerrel. It would be as well for you to know all there is to know. . . . But you had better tell him, Mickey. You are a better hand at that sort of thing than I. Any-

how you ought to be, who are by way of being a newspaper man." He looked across at Michael with a wan sort of smile.

Michael nodded assent. "You see, M'Kerrel, it is like this," he began. "Jim Marley made a large fortune out of a silver-mine in Australia. He and my father were in Melbourne together when they heard rumours of silver in what was then the 'Never-Never' country. So they got an outfit together, and invited a mining engineer whom they knew—Gabriel di Conti by name—to join in with them. My father died on the way, after suffering many hardships, but the other two struggled on. They seem to have got out of their reckoning, for the journey took them much longer than anything they had counted on, until one day they found themselves left with barely enough food to last out even if they turned back at once. Added to this was the difficulty of water. They had got into a trackless desert where the existence of water-holes had to be taken more or less for granted, and the failure to strike them risked. Here the Italian's courage failed him and he begged Marley to turn back. But Marley was not that sort. He refused to return before reaching a distant range of hills they were heading for, and which now appeared dimly in a purple haze. The upshot of it was that they agreed to divide the supplies and part company.

"'But remember,' said Marley, 'if I strike the mine and live to return, you will have forfeited your share of anything that's coming out of it.' He was not going to risk his life to make the fortune of any Dago, as he said afterwards. And it was here that the first 'yellow streak' in di Conti appeared, for he tried to barter his so-called rights for a half of old Jimmy's share of the food, apparently thinking that his own share might not be enough to see him safely through on the long trail back."

"I never understood why my uncle listened to the swine at all," Dick broke in hotly. "But the fact remains that he did. At least, he agreed to play di Conti at poker, staking the half of his own food ration against the other's claim on any possible find; only not a drop of his water supply would he surrender. . . . Well, he backed his luck in a gamble with death—and he won, hands down. He would never have got back alive, had he not fallen in with a party of pioneers on his return journey. Of course di Conti was in a frenzy when he heard of what turned out to be an amazingly rich find. First he tried for a share of the claim by whining; but my uncle wasn't having any of that. Then di Conti threatened, and I believe it ended in Jimmy giving him a dashed good hiding."

"Don't forget," said Michael, "the subsequent threats of murder and instant death, if half the fortune were not surrendered. They were kept up for years; and, of course, their only effect was to stiffen Jimmy's resolution. I wonder if he kept any of these letters?"

"Not he," Dick replied. "He chuckled over them, and into the fire they all went—as far as I know."

Michael frowned at this. Was it not the reason, he suggested, for Marley's keeping his pistol handy? Dick had forgotten about that, but he supposed it must have been so, for his uncle knew it had become a sort of mania with di Conti. Certainly it was not because of any belief in the haunted reputation of the old hall.

"My uncle told me," he continued, "that di Conti had died, leaving what he persisted in calling his share in the mine to his next-of-kin by way of an heirloom—a sort of family vendetta. In his last letter, written on his death-bed, I believe, he laid a dying curse on Jimmy, and he enjoined it upon his family to be the instruments of Fate, if they were not granted their rights. This took place about a year ago."

M'Kerrel turned to Frayne. "This is what you were referring to when you mentioned the Italian connection?"

Frayne nodded.

"Have you searched your uncle's papers?" M'Kerrel next asked of Dick.

"No. He kept them all in a safe in his bedroom. The keys must still be in his pocket. I forgot to take charge of them," he explained, in answer to M'Kerrel's look of surprise.

"Here they are. I took them over." And Michael handed them to his friend.

M'Kerrel was filling his pipe afresh. He pressed down the tobacco with his thumb carefully and said: "You were the last to see your uncle alive, Mr. Marley?"

Dick nodded.

"And was there anything in his manner then which, in your opinion, could conform with the theory of suicide? I mean, did he seem agitated about anything?"

A slight tinge of colour came into Dick's face. "I—don't know," he hesitated, his eyes seeking Michael's. "That is to say, I could see nothing in his manner to indicate it."

"But something on his mind that was perhaps causing him anxiety?"

As he spoke, M'Kerrel was carefully balancing his pipe in one hand and a match-box in the other, seeming most intent on their proper poise.

"Yes," Dick admitted, "there was."

"Sufficient to lead him to seek his own death, would you say?"

"I—don't know. But how can a man tell what is in another's mind?" Dick demanded with a rising colour.

M'Kerrel lit his pipe with extreme precision, and only when it was drawing to his satisfaction did he answer.

"That's very true," he said. "Well, Mr. Marley, I'll

have a look at the safe, if you don't mind. And after that I'll be bidding you good-night."

It was M'Kerrel himself who opened the safe. Noticing the curious way in which he did this, and the care he took not to touch it with his fingers more than he could help, it occurred to Michael that M'Kerrel intended to try for some finger-impressions there—a surmise which he later found to be correct.

There was very little in the safe. Some £70 in gold, and a gold watch. And lastly, some legal documents in two bundles, the elastic band round one of which was broken and had the appearance of having been broken quite recently. This was the bundle containing Marley's will.

CHAPTER IX

M'KERREL had returned to Marley Pryors. A busy man, he had yet managed to spare the time, ostensibly in order that he might go into matters on the spot with Jacobs, the inspector whom he had brought down to continue inquiries officially.

It was late in the afternoon when he arrived at the Marley Arms ; and as he had to return the following day, he had written to Frayne asking if he could join him at the inn before dinner, as that would be their only chance of meeting alone.

He had sent Jacobs out to pursue certain inquiries in the village, and was alone when Michael arrived. He was looking tired and out of spirits, but he was plainly pleased to see his friend.

"Have a drink ? " he said. "Do us both good—though I don't think much of the whisky they keep here. Man, you've got to go to parts of Scotland if you want to know what real whisky means."

They sat and smoked, and were uncomfortably silent for a spell, each instinctively knowing the reason of the other's reluctance to begin.

"Well," M'Kerrel said at last, "what's your news, Michael ? "

And Michael woke out of a brown study. "None," he answered gravely, and waited.

"And you think the Italian may have had a hand in the murder ? "

Michael said he did ; he noted that there was not a thought of suicide left in M'Kerrel's mind.

"Basing your theory on the fact that a certain Gabriel di Conti wrote threatening letters, and is alleged to have passed on a blood feud on his death-bed to his next-of-kin ? "

The keen eyes searched Michael's face earnestly from under their grey bushy eyebrows.

"Then there is the village carpenter—Mongini. Obviously of Italian origin. Of course I know it is far-fetched, but remember this, Mac : that carpenter must have known of the secret panel. . . ."

"Aye." The Scot nodded his head encouragingly. "And I've got Jacobs out now, following up the trail of your carpenter. . . . Anything else ? "

"Well, for another thing, he was the man who removed the lock of the conservatory door just before poor Marley met with his death. I think I mentioned this to you. . . ."

"H'm," said M'Kerrel in his noncommittal way, "there's more than love that laughs at locksmiths. Nothing very conclusive about that, friend Michael."

"And there's more than that," continued Michael.

But he stopped suddenly as though his mind had changed about something. M'Kerrel's eyes were sharp as gimlets. His intuition was almost uncanny at times. It was a small thing for him to see that Frayne had not completed the sentence that had first been on his mind. But he offered no comment, and Frayne continued :

"Jim Marley was a just man, but he was one to hold what he had and to bequeath it after death according to his lights. The present will was made about a year ago, after di Conti's death, I think. In this he leaves his money to Dick, with a handsome bequest to myself, and certain legacies—a substantial one of £2,000 to Peters, by the way. If Dick should die without issue, then a portion is

bequeathed to charity and the remainder to myself. And failing Dick or myself inheriting, one half goes to charity and the other to di Conti's heirs, should any of these present themselves. He was not driven to this by threats, mark you ; but out of the generosity of his heart, leaving something to the di Conti family in absence of those he considered had the prior claim on him. You see, Dick is the last of the old line of Marleys ; there are no distant connections left."

"One moment. You say Marley made this will after di Conti's death. Does that mean there was an earlier will, bequeathing a portion to the di Contis, irrespective of circumstance ? "

"Yes," said Michael.

"Now it is you who will inherit the major part of a large fortune in the event of young Marley's death ? "

"Yes," Michael returned, "that is just the point. Assuming the di Conti connection to be responsible for the murder, it is all to their advantage now to get Dick out of the way."

"And then they have only to dispose of you ? "

"Exactly. And there is more to it yet. For after di Conti's only son was killed in the war, one of the others took up the feud and threatened Marley more vehemently than ever. Marley got his back up at that and had a new will drafted whereby no portion of his estate should go to any of them under any circumstance whatsoever. I have it from Dick that his uncle showed him the draft of that will on the very night of the murder, and discussed the matter with him. . . . Now what do you make of that ? "

M'Kerrel thought for a moment. "Is that draft will in existence ? " he asked.

"No ; it has disappeared."

M'Kerrel sat silent, stroking his chin thoughtfully.

"Well," he said at last, "it cuts both ways, as it happens." But more than this he would not say.

Then after another silence: "There is another point. How could your theoretical di Conti be posted up in all this, which is after all 'inside information'?"

And Michael answered to that: "Through someone who had furnished himself with a duplicate key to the safe."

Again it was Mongini who was in his mind as he spoke, a fact which did not escape the other's attention.

"Aye," was all he said. "So that is the clue you're working on? . . . Mind, I'm not saying it is not a good one, though it wants a lot of linking up. And I don't see how you could do better than work out your theory; for, right or wrong, you've got to choose a course and stick to it in that dogged way of yours. It may be all wrong—and that means failure. But you've got to work on something, and—you've got to get busy. Have you started yet?" he asked abruptly.

And Michael shook his head.

Without another word, M'Kerrel pulled out a piece of paper, wrote on it, and handed it to the other, saying:

"Here is the name of a man who will be of assistance to you. He is a private detective, and the best man you could have for a job of this sort. Tell him I sent you. And," he added, shooting a meaning glance at Michael, "tell him to get busy."

"Why, Mac—what do you mean?"

"Just what I say."

It was not the dramatic instinct which delayed M'Kerrel in finishing what he had to say. He had a great notion of the fitness of things, and the orderly sequence which should lead up to a climax, step by step, while omitting none of the essentials by the way. Once that climax was reached, he would shut up like a book, and that was

another reason why it was never wise to hurry him out of his gait.

A vague dread of what that climax must be had been weighing on Michael's mind from the beginning; it had become a living fear now.

"But there is nothing else to it, M'Kerrel," he essayed, pausing to watch the effect of his words. "Either it is suicide, or else it is murder. If the latter, then we have got to look for the murderer from among the di Conti crowd. There is not a ghost of a motive elsewhere."

M'Kerrel sucked hard at his pipe and stared into the fire. "I'll be thinking there may be a motive nearer home than that, Michael boy," he said gently. "To come to actualities—what then?"

"You mean that . . . that . . ."

"Aye, I mean just that."

And then Michael knew.

"I have got to arrest him to-night—certain facts have come to light which I cannot discuss at present. Man, I'm sorry. . . . You had better break it to him yourself. Get it over as soon as you return. Have some dinner, then I'll be up at the house at eleven o'clock and motor him along myself. It will be quietest that way."

A silence fell between the two friends. There was nothing Michael could say. He had felt the blow impending, and he saw now that M'Kerrel had seen through him from the start.

"You see, young Marley was the last to see his uncle alive. And they have been finding plenty of motive up in London. There's a lot of things fit in. . . . Aye, and more's the pity. But 'a stout heart for a stey brae,' as we say in Scotland. You will find in Kelly one of the sharpest brains in the country, with just that touch of imagination which you yourself lack. A psychologist in crime is what he styles himself. He'll let you work with

him, what's more. Only, mind this, he is a little man, and touchy as the devil in the little things. But once he has taken on your case, you can trust him absolutely. Tell him all, that is my advice to you. . . . You can tell him more, perhaps, than you have told me." And he said this with a meaning smile. Then he added: "So you and he should get on fine together; what the one lacks the other has, and *vice versa*. And that is all I can do for you in the meantime, Michael—except to cheer you when I can. . . . And now you'll be wanting to go back to your friend."

He rose and held out his hand.

Michael took it and wrung it warmly. "Mac, you're a pal," he said simply.

"Away with you, man! It's just nothing."

"You are trusting me a lot."

"No," replied M'Kerrel stoutly, "I have told you nothing that you did not know yourself. Good-night," he said, opening the door for Michael to pass out.

M'Kerrel's was a face cast in a rugged mould; but behind it was masked a world of kindly feeling. The mask fell as the door closed upon his friend, and a great pity shone in his eyes.

CHAPTER X

I HAVE known them both since boyhood and have recognised this distinction between Michael and Dick from the beginning, the development of which I have watched with considerable interest until the character of each has become permanently moulded: that Michael was driven by his nature to pursue to its end whatever he had once set his hand to, and with a great disregard of the lesser issues; formed of a tougher fibre than most, he was a man who knew how to wait, and not anticipate, whereas Dick was a man who might not pursue a thing to its final issue, if the pursuit were long; for his was the need of instant things. But then you never quite knew with Dick, and probably he did not quite know himself at times. To this extent he was the victim of his own temperament, which might take him unexpectedly at any moment and lead to unlooked-for results. But there again, to some extent, lay his charm.

Michael hurried back with a misgiving that grew at every step; due not only to the threatening cloud of danger, but also to that unknown quantity which he had always vaguely sensed in Dick. Hot-blooded and reckless he knew his friend to be, and hasty at the first sign of restraint; yet he could not be quite sure just what would happen now, or how Dick would take what was coming to him.

There was a man loitering about the lodge gates. He

was in plain clothes, but there was no mistaking his calling to Michael's experienced eye. So already the net had closed down on Dick! And when he recalled M'Kerrel's advice to get busy, Michael's blood ran cold; M'Kerrel, he knew, was not the man to give such a hint lightly.

Dick was in his room, smoking and staring moodily into the fire when Michael got back. The air was thick with smoke, and the hearth was littered with cigarette-ends, and the heavy, peculiar fragrance of this particular tobacco assailed the nostrils unpleasantly to one just entering from the fresh night air.

The box lay open on the table; Michael crossed and picked it up, frowning at the thought it recalled.

Dick asked him what was the matter; Michael did not answer at once, but made pretence of sniffing at the tobacco, pulling a wry face over it as he did so.

"Does Mongini supply you with these?" he asked suddenly, glancing across at Dick. "The sort of thick, black thing that the Italian workman would smoke."

"Not a bit; they are the most expensive things in cigarettes I have smoked. You could not buy them at all in England. I have had them imported direct from Italy."

Michael pulled out his pipe, filled it, and got it well going. And all the time his mind was working in ever-widening circles round the one central fact, and he was more glad than he had ever been of anything that he had concealed the cigarette-end picked up near the conservatory door. But how close a thing it had been!

Odd the triviality of chance that directs a man's destiny. It is only in years to come that you can trace the stream through all its windings, up to the very source, and then what a tiny bubble of water Fate springs from! But it was not so much the thought of this in which Michael's mind now dwelt as he stood perfectly motionless, his eyes riveted on his friend's face.

A log had crackled into a living flame, lighting up the features which were turned towards it; new lines were visible, and a look of tragedy in the handsome face, from which all the youthfulness was gone. Michael, who watched it, was conscious of a sudden fear.

Suddenly Dick turned, aware at last of the other's scrutiny. "What is it?" he queried. "Why do you look at me like that?"

Michael's eyes dropped.

Then Dick did a curious thing. He rose suddenly and walked close up; then he bent down and stared into Michael's eyes.

"You may have the face of a sphinx," he said, "but I know there is something wrong when you look like that. . . . Tell me. Tell me, Michael," he repeated, gripping his shoulder tightly as he spoke.

Their eyes met, and in an instant the fear had gone out of Michael's heart, leaving a sense of shame that it should ever have entered.

"Sit down, then, and I'll tell you. You are right, Dick; there is something."

Dick sank back into his chair. Reaching out his hand, he helped himself to a fresh cigarette, which he lighted from the glowing end of the old. Michael waited for him to finish; and when he spoke, he had to go straight to the point in his own blunt fashion.

"It is damned absurd, Dick, but the fact is, the police suspect you of having murdered old Jimmy. They were bound to fasten a motive on someone." He added quickly, as Dick sprang to his feet: "And you happen to offer the only target for the present. You see, you were the last to be seen with him. And then—well, they have ferreted out your trouble with that money-lender in town."

"Yes—and . . .?" Dick's drawl was calm; but an odd sort of look had come into his face, as if the colour had all

been pinched out of it by the force of some suppressed feeling underneath.

"The fact is, M'Kerrel has come down with a warrant for your arrest. It is damnable, old fellow; and it won't be long before we show them that," he explained with more assurance than he himself was feeling at the moment.

Dick stood perfectly motionless, his eyes narrowing down to a fixed point. "I see," he said. "And when is this—er—interesting event to take place? . . . I mean to say, when is your—friend—coming to arrest me?"

He spoke with more than his usual drawl, and with an air of exaggerated indifference as he leaned against the mantelpiece, every trace of his former emotion driven from his face. There was an odd something in his manner, too, of which Michael recognised the symptoms, but to which he was still unable to assign a cause.

"To-night, Dick . . . after dinner."

Dick flicked a speck of ash from his sleeve, carefully, as though its removal were the sole thing to afford him any interest at the moment.

"I see," he said, with the same deadly calm as before.

"It is a point of motive they are basing it on. That is all. The idiocy of it will dawn on them soon."

Dick gave a short laugh. "Yes, there is a motive right enough. I am beginning to see that now," he observed, regarding the other watchfully. "You are the only person who knew about my raising money on the reversion—until I told the old man himself that night."

"Dick! What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, nothing," raising a hand to his lips to smother a yawn. "But," he added, and the flicker of lightning Michael knew so well suddenly shot into his eyes, "you can infer what you damn well please—you and your friend of Scotland Yard."

“You—you think, I told M’Kerrel?” Michael queried in his slow way, stammering a little as he spoke.

“Who else? . . . He is your friend, isn’t he?”

Michael remained as imperturbable as ever. He was making allowances for Dick; and then he is the sort of man who is never seen to such advantage as when he is up against it.

“You are mad to talk like that, Dick,” was all he said.

“Yet not so mad, Frayne. . . . Not so mad.” Dick repeated it.

Then, with his heart full of a pent-up rage, the fiery temper of the man broke loose.

“Motive!” he sneered. “Yes, there is motive enough in your wanting to put me out of the way. By God! I see it all now,” he shouted, bringing down his fist with a crash on the mantelpiece.

Just for an instant, Frayne felt like letting the other go to the devil in his own way—a feeling that was as instantly smothered back in a wave of pity. He knew his friend so well, whose strength was that of the impetuous rather than the ‘strength of the strong.’ He had seen the same unreasoning anger more than once before—this summer lightning of the man which was followed by the swift remorse of a generous soul for the extremities into which his temper had led him. He thought of all Dick had been through. He knew how bitterly Dick would regret, as soon as a calm reflection had returned to him.

Without another word, Michael left the room.

And he had not been wrong in his surmise, for just before dinner Dick sought him out.

“You were right,” he admitted in that boyish way of his, “I was mad. And you were a brick, Michael, to let it pass. For I know you will,” and he caught his friend’s hand and wrung it. “I lashed out at you in that beastly

way of mine. . . . In my own heart I knew I was being a beast, and—and I think that made me lash all the harder. And then you looked so damned patient and unmoved about it all. . . . But it was unpardonable on my part. I don't know what takes me at such times. . . .”

Michael broke in, and his voice was gruff: “That's all right. I do understand, old fellow. Don't let's say any more about it.”

And so the incident was closed. Poor old Dick! he was his own worst enemy, and all the world's friend.

It was a sad dinner to which the two friends sat down that night—Bailey had returned to town the day before. The memory of it, so Michael told me afterwards, will never quite pass from his mind; and I can well believe it. He would not speak of it, though every detail must have stamped an impress deep into his mind.

When it was come to an end, and they sat over their last glass of port together, Dick—turning to his friend for advice as he had done on more than one crisis of his life before—said:

“What do you think, Mickey? Should I write and tell her now, or should I wait?”

“You mean . . .”

“To tell Esmée now that I love her or to ask her to wait? That is what I am asking. . . . I can't make up my own mind about it.”

Michael sat silent, but only for a moment. “Yes, tell her now. Write at once and tell her.” And he turned to the fire, and the pictures living there.”

Later he accompanied Dick to his room to help him arrange his things. He noticed the automatic pistol in its case, carelessly open on the table.

“What about this?” he asked.

“Leave it where it is. I have nothing to conceal.”

That was just what Michael wanted him to do, so he said nothing, fearing lest Dick's opposition should be aroused—for he had come up against Dick's obstinacy in the past. What possessed Dick to change his mind after Michael had left him can only be accounted for by the impulsive working of the man's nature. But conceal the pistol he did; and when it came to light later, as it was bound to do, his friend groaned at the unspeakable folly of it.

There was one other warning Frayne gave before they parted. "Never admit you made a confession to Jimmy that night," he said.

And Dick promised.

CHAPTER XI

THE night they took Dick off and lodged him in the county gaol was as miserable a one as ever Michael had spent in his life. The two had been friends—and more than brothers—from the earliest days. And now Michael was quite alone in the old house of Marley, and the gloom which settled down was more intense than ever ; the spirit of evil seemed to creep out of the old wing, and to spread itself from room to room until it invaded even the cheerful glow of Michael's bedroom. And yet he was a man accounted unimpressible among his friends.

Thoroughly tired out though he was, his mind could find no rest from the questions which assailed it ; and when at last he slept, dreams crowded in upon him. He would be aware of that old haunted hall, his body chained to it, as it were, while that which was 'he' looked on. Stealthy footfalls on the stone staircase mounted slowly up, then before they reached the top he would awaken in his struggles to be free. Or again, he would find himself approaching that fateful alcove, drawn there by some nameless horror which lurked behind the portière. And he would wake up as he crossed the threshold, from the very intensity of his efforts to escape. Again and again the same thing happened, dozing off and waking up from the horror of it. He had never known such continuity in a dream before ; he could not explain it away to his own satisfaction, but there was some powerful loadstone drawing him across the borderland of dreams.

He was glad when morning came, and he was able to catch an early train to town, where, on his arrival, he hailed a taxi and drove at once to the address which M'Kerrel had given him. Fortunately he found Kelly at home.

At first sight Michael did not quite know what to make of Kelly. He was a spare, dapper little man in a tweed suit of a peculiarly loud check, with the look of a retired jockey in every hard-bitten, fine-drawn line of him. He had the humour of an Irishman, with a Yankee flavouring to it and a Transatlantic twang. Very round, very red, and very clean-shaven, his face shone like a well-polished apple.

"Been looking for you," he said, clipping his sentences and getting a good pace on his speech. "How-de-do, Mr. Frayne? Sit down, please. Yes, it was M'Kerrel who 'phoned to me about you."

And so he greeted Michael, motioning him to a seat and answering his unspoken questions simultaneously. Then he mounted himself on a chair, straddling across it and gripping the back of it, and looking at Michael with the same bright eagerness as though it were the starting gate he contemplated on Derby day.

"Well?" he demanded, his round bright eyes twinkling intelligently.

So Michael settled himself down in his slow, forceful way to tell the story from beginning to end, explaining his suspicions as regards the di Conti connection, emphasising also the interest they had in ridding themselves of Dick by the means that now lay in their power. There were two things only he kept from Kelly: his discovery of that half-smoked cigarette and the matter of Dick's confession on the night of the murder.

"Di Conti," Kelly repeated thoughtfully to himself. He was biting on a black, oily cheroot of the Burmese

persuasion which protruded from one corner of his mouth. "Sounds aristocratic. . . . Tell me what you know of the family."

"Nothing, I'm afraid. Marley never mentioned anything about that—I doubt if he knew himself. They met in Australia, and no questions asked."

"And you don't know what part of Italy he hailed from?"

But regarding that, too, Michael could say nothing definite. All he knew was that Marley received threatening letters, one of which he had happened to see some years ago. He recollected the postmark was Naples, for he was a stamp collector in those early days.

"And you found nothing among his papers?" Kelly queried.

Michael shook his head.

"Ch't!" exclaimed Kelly, a sound like escaping steam issuing from between his teeth.

"Di Conti . . . threatening letters . . . Naples postmark—not a great deal to start on, as the elephant said when he slipped on a banana skin over the precipice. And this village carpenter—Mongini, you said his name was? Born and bred in Italy?"

"No, in England, I believe. At least his mother is English."

"So there is only his father's nationality to connect him with the di Conti? Does not sound as if there was any blood relationship between a di Conti and the village blacksmith. Eh?"

Michael admitted the truth of this, but suggested that they might have turned him to their own uses. At least, it was something to make a start on, and it was their only clue at present.

"Yep, some clue. I only hope it does not lead us into the intricacies of some Mafia or Black-Hand group," Kelly

observed, working the cheroot right from one corner of his mouth to the other. "I have had dealings with the gentle Italiano in Noo-York. I am not unaware of their ramifications. But I'll get right down to it for a start. Anything else?"

"Nothing."

"Well, let me see. This is Toosday. On Thursday I'll be coming to Marley House to have a look around for myself. You be there?"

Michael said he would be at the station and have a room ready in case Kelly should wish to stay overnight. And with that they parted.

It was a crisp November day. As Michael made his way through the Green Park the sun shining unobscured tempered the wind. He sat down on an empty seat, his eyes intent on the roadway, whereon he was describing intricate figures with the point of his walking-stick, while his brain was actively engaged with a problem of life and death. And the more he contemplated the clue on which his mind was set, the more remote did the chance of linking up appear. Kelly, in spite of all his cheerfulness, had somehow opened his eyes more fully to the gravity of the task with which they were faced.

At length he roused himself out of his reverie. This was not the spirit that wins, he told himself. And then his thoughts turned to Esmée Favoril. It was her happiness, too, that was at stake, as well as Dick's, and Michael registered a vow with himself that win he would.

With this he rose to his feet and resumed his way to the club, where it was his intention to lunch before catching the train back to Marley Pryors. As he mounted the steps he almost ran into Bailey, who was coming out.

"Hullo, Frayne!" Bailey greeted him with that quiet, pleasant smile of his.

"I have just time for lunch before catching a train. Do you feel like it?"

Bailey did.

"Come along, then," said Michael in his hearty way.

Bailey had little to occupy his time. He had few friends left in town, owing to his long absences from England. He had been Dick's friend more than Michael's at school, where all three had been in the same house, and though he and Michael had never had much in common, the two were always glad enough to meet.

It was early yet, and a table at the window was vacant. Their talk, as was natural, turned on Dick's arrest. A man with a noon edition took up his stand at the corner of the street, and looking from the club windows it was possible to read the posters:

"MURDER—OR SUICIDE. SENSATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS.
ARREST OF WELL-KNOWN MAN ABOUT TOWN."

"It is awful," Bailey muttered. "I cannot believe it."

"Of course not. But that is not the point. The police have discovered what they think to be a strong motive, and there are some unfortunate circumstances to strengthen them in their opinion. Dick is certain to be committed on the charge of murdering old Jimmy, and we have to do all we can to help him out. You and I in particular, Bailey, who are his friends and who believe in him."

"That is of course. . . . But it was suicide. There cannot be any doubt about that."

"There is no motive for suicide. And there are certain facts which negative the idea, as you know."

Bailey reflected for a moment, looking out of the window. "I don't remember much of what passed then," he said. Then, with a shudder: "Ugh! That room, it keeps haunting me still. I felt it the first moment I entered. Depend upon it, Frayne, there is something about the

room to account for it—something which drove him to his death in that curious way. It is a problem which requires psychological treatment. . . . I have made rather a study of that sort of thing—that is where I could help. One of these days I shall return to Marley, and then—I shall really know what it means.” But, though he smiled, the idea seemed to fill him with a shuddering horror.

A frown gathered on Michael’s face as he pointed out that such a theory would be of little use to Dick when he stood in the dock to answer the charge of murder ; adding that Bailey might feel the ‘influence,’ as he called it, but that old Jimmy never had, who spent night after night in the old hall without anything happening in the past.

“He may not have felt it, just as you would not feel it yourself in your own lack of imaginative vision. But I tell you it is there all the same, lying in wait. . . . And it got him in the end. It is of no use talking of such things to you, Frayne, and never could be. All the same, you may have need of my help in that respect yet.”

Bailey spoke with some heat. It seemed to work on his nerves that Michael should not be able to feel what others felt—himself in particular—and the calm scepticism irritated him.

Michael, in his good-humoured sort of way, admitted that such an aspect of the case was beyond him, being too material himself to regard any possibility beyond the strictly physical. “I grant you,” he said, “that I should not choose the old hall as being the most desirable room in the house to sit in of a night alone, and this tragedy of poor old Jimmy has made it more repugnant still. But I am unable to go further than that, I must confess.” He glanced at his watch and rose. He had to be getting along, he observed, if he was to catch his train to Marley Pryors.

“What is taking you back there ? Is it the vicarage that is beginning to attract ? ”

"No," was the very curt reply. "I am staying on at Marley House. There are things to be settled up yet."

"Alone?"

"Yes. Except, of course, for Peters and the servants. Why?"

"Well, it is more than I could do, that's all." And Bailey shivered slightly.

He offered to go as far as the station, and the two descended the club steps, chatting pleasantly of other things.

As they passed down a side street a poor old couple begged for alms. Frayne took no notice; not so Bailey, who laid a coin diffidently into the woman's hand. "Because," he explained almost apologetically, "she is a woman. And because the poor old fellow is past fighting for himself. . . . They both looked so damned cold. Besides," he added, a look of shrinking on his sensitive face, "I hate to see them suffer," and then he laughed. "Mere selfishness, you see, and cynical at that."

It was dark when Michael arrived at Marley. The solemn Peters was at the door to meet him, his face more like a graven image than ever, though Michael fancied the man was pleased to see him back again. Peters was possibly relieved of the prospect of having to spend a night alone in the house, if Peters could be imagined to have a feeling about anything in the wide world. But there was no disguising the fact that the manner of the man had grown more furtive since the tragedy occurred, a fact that was becoming more noticeable each day.

Michael found a note awaiting him. It was from Miss Favoril, asking him to call at the vicarage that afternoon, or any other which might prove to be convenient to him.

"Now what should I do about that?" he pondered, frowning to himself,

CHAPTER XII

MISS FAVORIL was seated alone in the cosy little vicarage study. The vicar was out, she announced ; and would Mr. Frayne have some tea ? It was so much cosier than in the drawing-room—she hoped he didn't mind. The demureness of her was disarming. Later, when he came to know her better, I fancy he regarded that particular smile with some misgiving.

“Thanks,” said Michael, “I should like tea very much.”

Tea is an occasion which I have never known Michael to regard with much enthusiasm. But possibly he liked watching Miss Favoril preside over the tea-table ; and it was a pleasant change from what he was accustomed to himself. He was not a domestic sort of fellow, he felt, and never could be. Still, it would be nice, when she and Dick were married, to sit by their fireside of an afternoon and chat cosily like this.

“Cream and sugar ? ” she queried. And he answered, “Yes, please,” without a moment's hesitation.

Now he never really liked tea—‘Waste of a good thirst’ he called it—and with sugar it became an abomination ; still, he was committed to it with a smile, and forgot his prejudice in the home-like intimacy of the occasion.

For she was putting him very much at his ease to-day, she was not laughing at him secretly from the depths of her eyes. He felt she was a woman you could talk to, after all.

They touched upon various topics of conversation, and

the courage and reserve of her was not lost on Michael, for it was not until tea was over that she broached the subject on account of which she had sent for him.

"Mr. Frayne," she exclaimed, "isn't it outrageous arresting Dick ! I have known him for four years now. . . . Oh, the abominable injustice of it ! "

She gave a little stamp of her foot, and despite the gravity of the occasion, it was all that Michael could do to withhold a smile.

And small wonder. She is as bewildering a person as I have ever met : imperious as youth, wilful as a spoilt child who has not yet learned of the world, and therefore demanding much of life. Yet I have known all that to vanish in an instant in the winning tenderness of her eyes ; coaxing, pleading, and still compelling you. Possessed, in short, of all that wilfulness and charm which so often unite to make a woman what she is. "What strange things women are," Michael confided to me about this time. "A man could only cope with them who himself had imagination and temperament." Poor Michael ! Small wonder, I say, that he could not understand. "They are," I assured him. "The very devil." But Michael merely frowned at this.

"I know Dick never did it," she cried, a look of hurt in her eyes. "I know he is frightfully impulsive and quick-tempered, but I just know he could not do it."

"So do I," said Michael in his slow, deliberate way. "I know, too, that there is not a more gallant and generous, or a more tender-hearted fellow in the world."

The look she gave him was his reward. And from that moment dated their friendship, though there was no immediate sign of it to follow.

"I saw the detective myself when he was here. . . . Oh, what a horrid man ! "

"No," Michael disagreed gravely, averting his eyes—for

it was difficult to dissent from anything when she looked at you like that. "I know M'Kerrel well. He is one of the best, and he is not a detective, as you call him. He is at the top. . . . You see, Miss Favoril, he was only doing his duty after all."

Instantly the girl's face clouded over. 'So that is the sort of friends you keep,' her expression seemed to indicate. What she actually did say was :

"Well, Mr. Frayne, can't you do *something* to get your friend out of prison? Dick *is* your friend, isn't he?"

"Yes." Michael began to feel like a convicted criminal, and without knowing why, for he was doing all he could; nothing to reproach himself with there. Had you told him of the perfect genius which the best of women possess for putting a man in the wrong, probably he would not have believed you. But now he could only hang his head, without quite knowing why.

"Well?" she demanded.

To gain time, he looked away and commenced stirring his tea. He thought for a bit, then said: "Miss Favoril, we are both of us friends of Dick's—his best friends, you and I."

"Yes"—impatiently.

"So I think I had better tell you all about it."

"Yes, tell me. . . . Tell me; that's what I *do* want you to do. . . . Dad may be back at any moment, and that will only waste more time."

I have often thought and smiled at the many ways which a woman has of drawing information. Michael did not see it, nor will he ever. But could he, being merely Michael?

"Tell me"—she laid her hand on his sleeve and let it stay there for a moment—"just everything."

And he did.

When he had come to an end of the telling, her eyes

were round and shining. "There was an Italian-looking man here last week, staying with Mongini," she exclaimed. "I saw him one afternoon as I walked through the village, and I believe I've seen him before, too. We must watch them closely. . . . We are friends now, aren't we, Mr. Frayne? I have so often heard Dick speak of you, you know. And I have never had a brother," she added with a look that was wistful.

"That is all right. I am merely Michael," he assured her, with one of those rare smiles that light up his strong face.

"What I really mean is that we are both friends of Dick, so we must be friends of one another."

The light in her eyes as she championed Dick's cause roused him to admire, and then to wonder. He had never known a woman such as this before.

"And we will follow it up together, and get Dick out of prison. Is it a bargain?" She put out her hand. And wondering a little what he should do with it, Michael hesitated. She gave a delicious little laugh at that. "Don't look so startled," she said.

He held her hand for an instant, dropping it abruptly. "Only, you know, this may prove to be more than a man's job," he said.

"How absurd and old-fashioned! Women are doing men's jobs nowadays, I believe," she announced, wrinkling up her little face. "You are one of these impossible men who still regard a woman as a bit of Dresden china. . . . Well, you will have to get over *that*." She was quite eight years his junior, but she spoke as though he were a little child. Then she went on decisively: "Now we shall meet quite often and tell each other how we are getting on with the clue. Oh——" she said, breaking off sharply as a sudden thought struck her.

"What is it?"

“Don’t you see it ? ”

“No.”

“*They* think they have settled with Dick, and now they are plotting against you. They have learned all about the will. Mongini opened Mr. Marley’s box with a skeleton key and read it.”

“It was a safe, not a box.”

“It’s all the same—of course he opened it. I don’t care what you say.” Michael had not said a word. There had not been a chance, as indeed there seldom is with Esmée. And Michael is a silent man. “I don’t care what you say,” she repeated, tapping with a finger on her knee. “I know I am right. . . . What are you going to do about it ? ”

Michael sat and silently deliberated the question. Her flight of thought was beyond him. He could not keep pace with it ; it bewildered him.

“How do you mean—what will I do ? ” he asked.

“Of course you will get out a warrant for their arrest.”

He frowned. “But what on earth for ? ”

“You must. At once—before they murder you.” She jumped up. “Wait, I’ll get my hat on and come with you to the police-station.”

“But they don’t serve out warrants like—like bread tickets, you know.”

He stood gazing down at the small figure from his own great bulk, faintly smiling at her in a perplexed, reluctant way.

“Don’t be so stupid,” she chided. “I will tell them to do it. Stubbs the constable will do anything for me.” A statement which Michael veritably believed to be true, though it did not seem worth while to point out that village constables do not deal in warrants.

“It is quite simple. Please,” she coaxed. “Oh, please ! ”

There is something of the immovable about Michael. But I really cannot say if he would have yielded the next second—or the second after that again—had the old vicar not entered in the nick of time.

CHAPTER XIII

MICHAEL was reading the morning paper by the fireside, and smoking an after-breakfast pipe, when he suddenly became conscious of Peters, who had slipped up in his silent way to stand effacing himself until Michael's attention should be freed.

"Well, Peters, what is it?"

"You know, sir, that I have served the late master for nigh on fifteen years, at home and abroad. He was a good master to me—none could have wished for a better."

What a dreary fellow, thought Michael, glancing at the pale, expressionless face and the black-coated figure as motionless as a wax effigy. In spite of his natural pallor, he had a curiously swarthy appearance.

"Yes, Peters, quite so. Now tell me plainly what you want. Your late master left you uncommonly well provided for. Are you thinking of retiring into private life? Is that it?"

"Oh, sir," Peters objected without change of tone, and still without moving a muscle, "I would not leave the family to whom I have become so attached. I have served the late master faithfully to the end, and I would not have wished to leave the house in this its hour of calamity."

Michael watched his face as he spoke, wondering, as he had often done before, at all that lay behind that death-like mask. Then the large clock in the hall struck ten, and he realised he had only a few moments to spare before leaving for the station to meet Kelly.

"Now, Peters, I have only a little time to spare at present. Speak out, man, and tell me what is on your mind."

Peters shifted his weight from one foot to the other; then fixed his furtive gaze more intently on Michael, and said :

"Mr. Frayne, sir, I am afraid."

"Afraid!" said Michael, astonished that any emotion whatsoever should register itself on the man's brain. "What are you afraid of?"

"I have been afraid since yesterday," was the soft reply. "And I cannot go on, sir."

Michael was almost angry. He pulled out his watch and consulted the time. "All right, Peters, only three minutes left. Get on with it."

"Well, sir, you must know there is something queer about the place."

"You mean the old hall in which Mr. Marley met with his death?"

"Yes, sir. I can't rightly explain it, but many a time in the past has it given me a turn when I have been tidying up there. It sort of draws you, and it gives you the creeps when you get there." Peter paused and drew his hand over his face. "A servant has his feelings, sir, though he keeps them to himself. The master, you know, wouldn't have any of the other servants straightening up there but me."

"But you have been aware of this all along. Why should it worry you so much now?"

Michael's interest was aroused. Profoundly distrustful of Peters as he had always been, he was bent on probing further.

"Mr. Frayne, sir"—and Peters' voice sank to a whisper—"you know they are all afraid of the old wing—not one of the other servants would dare set foot

on it—not now, sir. . . . But last evening something happened. . . . And I don't like it, I don't indeed, sir."

Michael was conscious of a sudden quickening of interest. "What happened?" he asked.

"Well, it was this way, sir. After you had finished dinner I found I had mislaid some keys. I searched high and low for them; but all the time I knew it was in the old wing I must have left them, when I went there in the morning to tidy up. I was hoping against hope—but all the time I just knew. . . . You see, sir, I needed the keys badly to lock up the silver for the night." He paused.

"So you went along to fetch them?"

"Yes, sir, I did just that. I found them alright, and had turned for the door when a sound fell upon my ears. But it was hardly a sound, sir, so thin and cold it was. It came from the direction of the conservatory entrance. A sort of pattering noise, only it was muffled like."

"Rats in the wainscoting, Peters."

"No, sir, it wasn't rats, begging your pardon. I know the sound of them well enough. . . . It started from the stone stairs, and then it sounded behind the portière. It was—well, I've a difficulty in explaining it, sir. And I don't like it."

Michael did not smile; he was frowning grimly. "But you must have your own ideas about it. What do you make of it yourself, Peters?"

"Just this, sir—that the sound was not the sound of rats, nor yet of anything that's living," and his voice sank to a sepulchral whisper as he added: "It was a sound of the dead, sir. . . . like something coming up from the vaults below."

The man's expression did not alter, but a sort of tremor passed over him. Michael too maintained a perfectly grave face.

"And then what did you do?"

Peters' eyes never left the ground. "I hurried off, sir, banging the door shut behind me. And I listened outside for a moment. There was a curious dull thud in the distance. Then silence."

"It is all nonsense, of course. But why did you not come at once and tell me?"

"No, sir."

"Why, I asked."

"I was afraid, sir."

"Of me?"

"No, sir; of—of what we might find there if you came."

Michael snorted. "What rubbish!" he exclaimed. "I am surprised at you, Peters. I thought that you at least would have been above that sort of thing."

All the time he had the feeling that there must be some motive at the back of this. He could not credit Peters with such folly, and he was determined to investigate further; though what could come of it he did not stop to imagine.

Peters was very humble about it. "Yes, sir," he agreed, "it certainly does seem like that. In the light of day, sir. But when night draws on—well, I don't like it, as I said before, sir."

The clock chimed the quarter, and Michael had to go. He might be late as it was and he was not the man to keep people waiting. He must be off now, but he would resume the matter on his return.

Peters had followed him to the door. As he opened it for Frayne to pass out he said, with his eyes on the ground: "I could never wish to leave the family, sir. But I don't like it, and I must give you notice to-day, sir. I should be grateful if you could see your way to let me go the next time you are to be absent yourself from the house. . . . Better shut it up, sir," he said, in a low voice that

vibrated curiously. "It is the house of the dead. It is not for the living, if you'll pardon me saying so much, sir."

Michael brushed past him without another word, jumped into his car and was off at top speed down the avenue. He arrived as the train, which was a few minutes late, was emptying itself of its passengers.

Kelly arrived looking very dapper, very alert, and with a smile on his red face. "Here I am," he said, holding out a hand, while in the other he gripped a small handbag tightly.

Arrived at Marley, Michael asked Kelly if he would have anything to eat or drink. But Kelly's reply was that he had eaten all he ever ate until lunch-time, and that he never drank until the sun went down.

"We can get down to our job right now," he added. "Anything fresh?"

Michael shook his head.

That also was Kelly's report up to date. "A nil return," he called it. Then he proceeded to detail his line of action. Their first requirement was to find the di Conti descendants, and after that to have them shadowed. He had set inquiries afoot in Naples, also he had inserted advertisements in the English and Italian papers.

"Sweet are the uses of advertisement, in the words of the bard. . . . Of course nothing may come of it. The birds may smell a rat and shy off," he said, with an Irish mixing of his metaphors. "But on the other hand, there may be dissensions among them—being relatives—and one party may give the other away. I am a great believer in the Press, Mr. Frayne—the Press and psychology. We are sure to find a use for both of them before we are out of the wood. Now let us have a look at the haunted room. It is haunted, is it not?" And he chuckled drily

to himself. Without waiting for a reply, he continued : "The Press is already beginning to write it up : 'The Marley Mystery,' and the 'Haunted Hall.' That is the sort of stuff we want to give them."

It was as well to be ready for all emergencies, Kelly explained. A jury was composed of men like themselves ; many of them had wives. And in a weak defence the psychology of the British public was not a thing to be despised ; nor was that of its wife. He maintained that a jury these days was not slow to utilise any loopholes in favour of a man standing the life-trial.

"Give them as many loopholes as possible, that's my motto. But we are not downhearted, for all that," he added in his cheery tones as his sharp eyes noted a trace of disappointment in Frayne's face : "Come along, let us have a look at the room."

It was broad daylight as they entered. The sun poured in through the deep, narrow windows, but its rays must have been strongly transmuted in the process, for they only served to emphasise the sinister nature of the surroundings.

Kelly looked keenly about him. "Queer old spot this," he remarked, blowing out his cheeks until they grew more roundly polished than ever.

Then he asked Frayne to reconstruct for him the relative position of things as nearly as possible, and Frayne led him to the alcove. There the ashes lay dead in the grate. The chair still stood exactly where it had been ; only it was empty now of its last ghastly burden. An involuntary shudder took possession of Michael—the shadow of a dream, perhaps ; a moment, and it was gone. There was work to be done.

The chalk lines still remained on the floor where M'Kerrel had marked out the position of the pistol, and these Michael pointed out to Kelly.

“There was no chance of its having been suicide?” the latter asked suddenly. “No motive for such a thing?”

“Marley was not that sort,” Michael answered curtly. “It was murder—only they have arrested a man who was incapable of the crime.”

Kelly did not pursue the subject. “That being so, it remains for us to discover who did it,” he said. He was all keenness now, and he got down to business. “Will you please be seated?” he said briskly. “Just place yourself in the position of the deceased as far as you remember it.”

The air of detachment with which he made the request robbed it of all the grimness with which Dr. Capper would have invested it. He spoke in the manner of a photographer about to perpetuate a likeness with his camera, that was all. The humour of it struck Michael at first, but his face grew grimmer as he sat down in position while Kelly’s small bright eyes kept twinkling from him to the floor, or to the portière, and then back again. Kelly asked where the bullet had entered, and in answer Michael pointed to the place on his skull.

“Ch’t!” exclaimed the little man. “Looks as if there was no doubt about it. The murderer must have crept round the corner of the buttress. . . . Thank you, Mr. Frayne.”

And Michael rose. “That is the conclusion to which both M’Kerrel and Capper arrived,” he said.

“Whom did you say? Little Capper, the hanging doctor?”

Michael knew nothing about the doctor except what he had seen of the man when he came round to examine the body. But that, he recollected, was the name which M’Kerrel had called him—the ‘hanging doctor.’

“Must be the same. I heard he had left his practice in London, but I little thought he would have landed in a

place like this. I will look him up presently and see what he has to say. I can sometimes get him to show his hand—that's what comes of being a psychologist, y'see, Mr. Frayne. If he is out to hang our man—as he is sure to be—there is one thing to be done."

Kelly stopped and chuckled to himself, but again there was nothing offensive or callous in his manner. Michael asked what he meant.

"Why, to engage Barker, K.C., for the defence. And to engage him at once. That's where psychology comes in, y'know," he repeated. Then he went on to dilate upon its two main arteries, as he understood them. "Either," he said, "you tickle a man's vanity as you would a trout, until he feeds out of your hand and tells you what you're after, or else you ruffle his hackles until he comes out with all you don't want and leaves you to infer what you do. Now," he explained, "that's where Barker comes in. He has got the measure of his man to a nicety—'got his goat,' as they say in the States—and he is the one man calculated to upset the doctor's equanimity. They are old antagonists; I've seen 'em at it before. Just you get Barker on the 'phone this morning, Mr. Frayne, and don't forget to tell him who it is he is up against. He'll like it." Kelley's eyes twinkled at the thought, and he broke into his dry cackle of a laugh.

There was no answering smile on Michael's face, but a frown. It was the murderer of old Jimmy he was after, not merely a skilful counsel for the defence.

"We want more than that," he said, a set look about his mouth.

"Sure," returned Kelly, "and we'll be getting it too, please the pigs."

Though he kept his counsel to himself, there was, he knew, a lot of evidence piling up against young Marley; and he was not the man to despise the unconsidered

trifle in a case like this. There was a missing link in their only clue, and it was a big one ; and then there was the time factor to be considered.

He was now examining the conservatory closely. Once or twice he muttered to himself ; it was plain there was nothing to be found there. He had arrived at much the same conclusion as M'Kerrel, and he saw that the prosecution would try to show that young Marley had made his way out of the house and then round by the conservatory, or else that he had let himself down from the window to the roof of the balcony connecting the front of the house with the old wing. And pursuing his inquiries, he opened the door of the conservatory to pass into the shrubbery beyond, from which he could examine the outside.

By now the lock had been replaced, but to Michael's astonishment the door opened silently with the turning of the handle only.

"That's strange," said he ; "the door should have been locked. A new handle and key have just been fitted to it by that fellow Mongini of whom I told you when we first met. The key was left with Peters—at least, it should have been."

"Who is Peters ? " Kelly asked sharply.

"The man who showed you to your room."

"What—that animated mummy ? "

"Yes," and Michael gave a laugh. "But not so much of the animated about him. He is the most motionless person, I have ever known."

"H'm, maybe. But to me he looks like the motionless man who has sat on the powder magazine too long. Been long in your service ? "

"For fifteen years with his late master, whom, he will tell you, he has served faithfully all these years."

"English ? "

But Michael was unable to answer this question.

"Doesn't look like it," said Kelly. He was pushing the door backwards and forwards as he spoke, and finding that it moved noiselessly on its hinges.

"Thorough fellow that," he observed. "He has given the hinges a dousing of oil when he repaired the lock," and he pointed to a smear of oil on his fingers.

At lunch Kelly proved himself to be an interesting companion, with many an experience the narration of which was accompanied by a running comment on the criminal mind. This was, as always, an interesting topic to Michael, not only as journalist but also as a student of criminology in an amateur way.

Presently the door opened and Peters insinuated himself within. "Mr. Frayne, sir, may I have a word with you?" he asked in his sleek way.

"All right, Peters, but have it here. Mr. Kelly, in his capacity of private investigator, is entirely in our confidence, and the more he knows the better."

"Well, sir," said Peters, coming closer to Michael and casting a look of some mistrust on Kelly, "the fact is the servants refuse to stay in the house a day longer. One and all, sir."

Michael eyed him sternly. "Peters," he said, "you've been talking."

"Oh, sir, I would never do that. I have told them nothing. They have heard things for themselves, sir, and they are afraid." And he was very earnest about it.

"Afraid of what?" Kelly interrogated.

And Peters, standing perfectly still, cast a sidelong glance at Michael as though looking to him to answer. So Michael told Kelly the cause of Peters' trepidation, while Peters remained silent. Kelly nodded as if such a tale were an everyday occurrence with him, and not so much as a smile crossed his face.

"And when do they all propose to leave?" asked Michael.

"At once, sir."

"And you?"

Peters shuffled from one foot to the other. "I would never leave while there is a breath left in my body to serve the family. But you know, Mr. Frayne, sir, I cannot stay on here alone. . . . Oh, sir, the house should be shut up, if I may make so bold again. It should be shut up, sir," he repeated with the only change of expression Michael had ever seen him display.

It was curious how the fellow had a knack of getting on the wrong side of one who was not easily moved as a rule; but the soft purring voice, the very sleekness of the man, had always vaguely irritated Michael.

"That's all very well, Peters," he said brusquely; "it is a free country, and if you all wish to go I shall not try to keep you. But Mr. Kelly and myself are here for to-night. You will have to wait for another day."

Peters said: "Very good, sir," and was moving to the door when Michael called him back to question him about the key. Had the carpenter left it with him? And Peters answered: "Yes, sir," without a moment's hesitation.

"Why was it not locked, then?"

"Not locked, sir? The carpenter told me he had locked it—I particularly asked him, sir."

"And you did not try it yourself?"

"Well—no, sir." He had taken what the carpenter told him to be correct. The carpenter had been working on the estate for years past, and was a man to be trusted.

"Curious bird, that," Kelly observed as the door closed behind Peters. "Seems to have a fit of the funks all right." He laughed to himself. "Make good copy that. . . . 'The Haunted Horror.'" With that he announced his

intention of having a look round the village. "I'll try to draw Dr. Capper, and maybe I'll look in on your Signor Mongini. After that I'll do a little bit of press work. . . . Well, I'll be getting along. See you later."

Michael did not answer at once, but sat puffing at his pipe. "Kelly," he exclaimed suddenly, "you don't know me. But I can assure you I am a man without imagination or sentiment. You ask M'Kerrel."

Kelly had bright eyes like a squirrel's; they fastened on the square, powerful face before him thoughtfully.

"What's your proposition?" he queried.

"You'll think me mad. But will you sit up in the haunted room to-night?—unconscious that, for the first time, he had referred to it as such.

Kelly dropped back into his chair. His face opened out into a wide grin.

"You can give your psychology a little gentle exercise," said Michael, with an answering smile. "There is no saying——"

"Haw, haw!" Kelly guffawed; by psychology he meant the scientific study of the mind—not of 'spooks.'

Michael knew that, but he was going to sit up all the same, he reiterated in his slow, determined way. Kelly could please himself about it.

"I have got my reason," he said. "It is not superstition. It is Peters, and I can't help thinking there is something at the back of all this. I believe the fellow has got the servants all on the twitter for some purpose of his own. I can't think what it is, but there is little he seems to do without some cunning behind it."

Kelly was quite ready to see Michael through, if he was so bent on it; and he admitted the possibility of Peters being at the bottom of some 'hanky-panky' business of his own. But he still thought it was the waste of a good night's sleep.

“That’s all right,” he said in answer to Michael’s retort that he was not being asked to waste his. “But it is unofficial, mind. For if they were to learn in the Yard that Tom Kelly had been spook-hunting instead of minding his job they’d laugh me out of it altogether.”

CHAPTER XIV

THE short winter afternoon was drawing to its close. The fitful light of the flames towards which Michael's face was turned lit up the deep-set eyes, throwing into prominence the strength of his features and the indomitable set of his chin.

He was seated close to the fire, for it had been a bleak sort of day with a biting wind out of the north. There was a book on his knee—a treatise on criminology; but his mind kept wandering to Dick and the solution of the mystery which had engulfed his friend. From Dick his thoughts passed on, in a natural sequence, to Miss Favoril. How variable were her moods, he thought—from grave to gay and back again. He knew how profoundly she was feeling Dick's arrest, and the awful suspense of it for her. She was smiling often because she could have cried—somehow he understood that. It made him think of the little French aristocrat facing the Tribunal with a jest on her lips, and going to her death as though to a play. With all her childish absurdities, he could see the same proud fearlessness in the carriage of her head; probably that is why the simile occurred to Michael, who was not given to such imaginings.

The room was growing darker, the fire dying in the grate unheeded. Suddenly the door opened, and in flashed Miss Favoril herself.

“Here I am,” she said a little breathlessly, and glowing

with colour as though she had been running. Ah . . . I have surprised you. . . .”

How tremendous the man was, she thought, just a wee bit frightened at her own temerity.

“You should not have come here alone.”

Certainly he seemed very big and formidable as he stood looking down on her.

“And now you’re cross, and you think it isn’t proper. You funny old-fashioned thing!” But next moment the eagerness was back, and she was bubbling over with secrets to tell. “Guess why I’ve come. Guess!” she cried. “Only let me make up the fire first. . . .”

She was down on her knees, raking out the ashes and fanning the flames into fresh life. Michael watched her with a kind of grave solicitude; then he set himself to help, piling up the coals at her bidding until she was satisfied.

“There,” and she snuggled down into a chair. “Isn’t it nice? Now I can tell you all about it.”

“Shall I ring for tea?” he suggested, and without a smile.

“It is simply tremendous. I have run all the way to tell you. And I met a little man on the way in a big check suit. His face looked as if it had been painted a bright red, and then varnished over the top, you know.”

Michael knew. “That was Mr. Kelly.”

“Well, I have got him,” she announced.

“Whom?” he asked blankly.

“I have discovered the murderer.”

She sat up in her chair, very erect, trying to modulate her voice, as though the discovery of murderers—and of lost continents—were an everyday occurrence in her life. But a certain childish eagerness was giving her away. For an instant he regarded her in a puzzled sort of fashion. After that, I cannot say what possessed

him. A daring came upon him. He was enjoying her breathless excitement, and the sensation, of being able to turn the tables on her was a novel one.

"Really," he murmured politely, "now do let me ring for tea. Do you like muffins?" And he rang.

She was telling him she had discovered a murderer, and he was asking her if she liked—muffins!

She rose, and drew herself up to her full height. "Good-afternoon," she said with a sort of frozen dignity. Then she sat down again. "Why are you being so horrid?" she asked.

Michael slowly relaxed his gravity. Then he threw back his head, and that great laugh of his rang through the room, which made her laugh too. But his daring was at an end when he asked her to forgive him, and was very humble about it too.

"Friends?" she queried, and he said, "Of course."

"That's all right, then. I was a wee bit afraid you had gone back on your bargain, by the way you spoke. Now listen," she said, resuming her easy ascendancy. "I went out for a walk this afternoon. When I got to the forest—you remember that path?—well, I saw Mongini walking in front of me. So I stepped to one side and followed, dodging about among the bushes and things. It was dreadfully rough going, and I got caught in some briars and was simply torn to pieces. Look!" And she held out a slim little hand whereon one minute scratch appeared.

"Dreadful!" Michael murmured.

"And my skirt was torn to ribbons." She calmly proceeded to pin up a frayed end which it would have taken a microscope—or a woman's eye—to discover. When this was completed to her satisfaction, she continued: "Let me see, where was I? Oh yes—I crept along after him and had not gone far when I—I tripped

over a root and fell," she said, tripping over the words in her haste. "It was an awful moment, and I thought I had lost him. But I found, when I had picked myself up, that he had stopped. He was a good long way off, but I could see quite distinctly. . . . Do you know what happened?"

"Haven't an idea."

"Another man came out of the thicket and joined him. It was that very Italian whom I saw in Mongini's shop last week. There! What do you think of it?" And she threw back her head in conscious triumph.

Then she finished the account of her adventure. Mongini, she said, had handed two large parcels to his friend, and disappeared almost immediately. Then she came straight on to Marley House. "Running all the way, nearly. . . ." She paused, and there was something very childish in the way she waited for his appreciation. Apart from a personal anxiety, and the anguish it was causing her, the mystery of Marley had taken a strong hold of her, and the solution of it appealed to the strong vital courage of her.

Michael felt he had to say something. He temporised. The men were worth watching, anyhow, he said. Also he expressed the wish that they could have put her in charge of the investigations.

"Only it is a man's job. . . . Ah," he broke off swiftly, "here is Peters with the tea."

She sat quite silent, cupping her chin in the hollow of her hands and regarding Michael thoughtfully. He was laughing at her—that was the first shock."

"You are different to-day, somehow," she said at last. "You have the air of a man who has his way in the end. . . . Well, we'll see," and she smiled a little, with her eyes on the ground.

Miss Favoril presided, prattling all the time, and he put in a word whenever he got a chance, but he seldom

was able to catch her up. But he liked listening to her, and his smile became intermittent rather than reluctant. There was something soft and liquid in her voice; it was a cosy voice too, which fitted in with the firelight.

"Do you find me a dreadful little chatterbox?" she asked presently. "Dad says I am." Presently her mood changed. "We must find the murderer," she observed.

"We will."

"It is the only way to free poor Dick. Ah, we must." She rose and walked up close to where he was standing with his back to the fire. "You know," she coaxed, "you can be rather a dear at times." And she smiled up at him in that tantalising way of hers.

What was coming now was more than he could guess, except that it must be something more than usually impossible.

She moved up just a trifle closer to him. "Listen," she said. "Don't think me morbid or inquisitive or horrid. But I want to see the haunted room. . . . You are not listening to me," she exclaimed, as he tried to move away. "I've been reading in the papers all about the dreadful horror of the room—everyone is talking of it. And—you will take me to see it, won't you? . . . You're still not listening . . . I might find something that had escaped a man's notice. Women do, you know."

"No," he answered sturdily.

"But you will——"

"I never shall."

He shook his head. He did not wish her to see the room, and he spoke firmly. She asked him why, and he told her. It was gloomy, for one thing, and there were associations which might leave a memory behind. . . . No, he did not want her to see it.

"Don't be so obstinate," she said to him.

But even as she spoke she was becoming conscious of

something that might be quite masterful in Michael. He did his best to divert her attention. He talked of other things ; then he hinted at the vicar's getting anxious over her long absence. But this she treated with scorn—the vicar was not so stupid, and he was used to her by this time.

“Do show it to me,” she coaxed again.

‘Good heavens !’ he thought, ‘she has not forgotten it yet.’ Something like a groan escaped him. She took it for “Yes.”

“Come on, then, lead the way,” said she, herself marching off in front. But when she looked back at him he was so stern that she realised the extent of his yielding.

Michael turned on the electric switch in the passage, where it was already growing dark, then walked on in silence, the girl pattering behind him. He opened the door of the old hall and they entered.

A lurid ray of the sinking sun struck into the room through one of the deep narrow windows, the curtain of which had been drawn aside. It cast a light upon the floor as though it had been stained by blood. Michael lit up the room quickly. But electric light was an incongruous thing there ; Marley had seldom used it himself, preferring candles and lamplight.

They crossed the old stone flooring, worn with age and countless feet. Esmée kept very close to Michael ; her lips were parted.

“Is this the place ? ” she asked, with a catch in her breath as they passed on to the alcove.

He nodded.

She cast a quick, nervous look round her and gave a little gasp. “I can’t describe it,” she said, lowering her voice as though afraid to speak above a whisper, “but somehow it fills you with a sort of loathing.”

Certainly the place looked at its worst in the dying light and without a fire. The electric light only served to blacken the shadows which lay in wait.

"It is like a spider's web," she said softly. "Yes, that's it—the spider's parlour. And I feel like the fly. . . . Won't you step in? Oh!" She gave a muffled scream. "What was that?"

Only a couple of cats on the roof. There was a large colony of them about the stables, he asserted cheerfully, though the sudden clamour had startled him too for an instant.

The heavy portière affected her curiously. She would not go near it, nor would she let him lay a finger on it. "Because," she whispered, "it looks as though it might conceal—anything." And the old steel breastplate with the curious headpiece tilting over it drew her awed attention. 'Something peering through its shadow at us,' she felt.

"Oh, Michael, I'm frightened! You are more protective than—than formidable to-day, and I can't help calling you Michael. . . . Do you mind?"

"I ought never to have brought you here." There was an undercurrent of emotion in the gruffness of his voice as he felt the trembling of her hand on his arm.

"Take me out of it. . . . Yes, you never ought to have brought me here. Why did you?"

And feeling he was solely to blame, he marched her out of the room. Though he had remained silent, there was the shadow of a smile as he turned away from her; he was beginning to learn the rules of feminine logic. But as they re-entered the dining-room she turned to him with a shamed little look on her face.

"I fear I am a dreadful little coward in these creepy sort of things, and a horrid little cat for blaming you. . . . Forgive me." The generosity of her had risen above such rules.

He settled her comfortably by the fire, wishing to laugh her out of her fears before she left. It was all nonsense about the haunted room, he told her. "You go there to be thrilled——" He stopped, suddenly remembering these were old Jimmy's identical words; then he added cheerily: "It is all subjective, you know."

"What's that?" she queried, her face, like a question mark, and her eyes screwed up.

"Well——"

But she never would let him finish; he was too slow for that. "I don't believe you know yourself." She pounced upon him. Then with a return of her gaiety, she recommended that he discontinue the use of such big words.

"Subjective," said he, only too glad of the change in her, "is the thought, or fear, that arises from you as a subject. And objective is that which comes to you from some object outside yourself."

At this juncture Kelly returned and was introduced to Miss Favoril.

CHAPTER XV

“DON’T you think it dreadful of them arresting the wrong man like this ? ” She put it to Kelly vehemently.

Kelly nodded.

“And you have come to arrest the real murderer, Mr. Kelly ? ”

Kelly had—as soon as ever he could catch him. He answered quite gravely, but his red face grew a tinge redder, as though with an effort to suppress something. Then Miss Favoril told him of her afternoon’s adventure in the forest.

“And now you will catch them ? ” she added.

A slow grin spread over Kelly’s face. “Well, they have not gone very far,” he observed. “I saw them as I left the village. Peters was passing the time of day with them in the Cornsheaf as I passed through.”

Michael noticed the eager little face fall. “That’s all right,” he said. “Kelly is keeping his eye on them.”

“Sure, I am,” said Kelly.

It was a strange wild evening on which Michael set out to escort Esmée back to the vicarage. His car had broken down, and he had suggested telephoning for a conveyance to Marley Pryors ; but the girl said she preferred to walk in any case, and that he was not to worry.

There was a faint luminance in the midst of the wrack of furiously driven clouds, but in the long winding avenue the night was very black indeed. The old elms, bending their boughs to the blast, creaked and groaned ; and in

a lull the dead leaves kept pattering along, murmuring to themselves as they passed. Then great gusts of wind would come sweeping down, buffeting everything in their path and passing with that curious thrumming sound which heralds the rising of a storm.

Esmée slid her arm through Michael's. "I'm frightened," she observed, "and I shall remain frightened until we are out of the avenue. Oh, it *is* a horrid place!"

"That is simply because you imagine things about it, as I told you before."

"Now don't say that again."

"Say what?"

"Subjective."

Michael guffawed. "Then I shan't. I give you my word, Miss Favoril."

She came to a standstill, halting him with her. "Esmée, please," she corrected softly.

"Esmée," he repeated awkwardly, rather like a school-boy repeating an unprepared lesson.

"That's right. Now come along. I don't know what dad will think. You have made me frightfully late as it is."

And Michael said he was sorry. He was beginning to discover it was much the quickest way to shoulder all the blame from the outset, with a woman. His education was making progress.

On they trudged, and for a while in silence. But the dark and the storm remained full of terrors. Though she made light of it now, Michael could feel a tremor on his arm, now and then, and he cursed himself again for being persuaded to show her the haunted room. The sudden hooting of an owl right overhead, and she drew closer to him in a panic.

"I *am* frightened!" and she clung to him for a second.

This time, as he pointed out, it was only an owl. And

he laughed—it seemed the only thing to him to do. But she drew away and walked on without his arm.

Presently she asked if he had ever had a sister; and when he answered “No,” wondering a little at the question, she said, “Ah, I thought as much.” But she would not tell him why.

They passed through the lodge gates and out into the main road. The gloom of the trees was left behind, and her independence was reasserting itself. His arm was ignored.

“So you have no imagination in you?”

“No sentiment either,” he boasted.

She cast a sidelong look at him, her head on one side. “Haven’t you?” she echoed softly, and looked upon the ground, smiling. He had always mistrusted that downward smile; in time he came to know how much it might conceal.

“Well, your education has been neglected—that’s all. But never mind,” she remarked pleasantly; “you are merely Michael, an unimpressionable man and quite immovable.”

He assented to this, smiling slowly back at her.

The lights were growing closer. They were nearing the village; Michael could see the rise into the High Street with the vicarage chimneys beyond. They plodded along for a few steps with their heads down, fighting the wind, which rose in a sudden fury and ended in a shriek. When it was quietened down, she said:

“You won’t mind me worrying you at odd times like this?”

“Not a bit.” Michael was hearty in his reply.

They would have to meet, she explained, to consult over clues and things. And he pointed out that Dick had always looked upon him as a brother, so she could command him in a similar fashion at all times.

"Yes, of course," she replied, and thanked him.

At the vicarage gate they halted. She asked him to come in ; her father would be pleased to see him. Michael excused himself. Kelly was waiting, he said, though he was careful not to tell her of the vigil planned for the night.

"Michael," she murmured, as they said good-night, "I'll find her for you some day, I truly will. . . . But you'll have to marry a gardener."

"A what ? "

"A person who digs."

He laughed. How absurd she was ! . . . Well, there was no sentiment to be dug out of him, thank goodness. And he said as much.

She left him with a memory of something palpitating and wonderfully alive : hopeful, eager, and with a cheerfulness and charm which radiated from her wherever she went. The unexpectedness of her would always hold a man and keep him guessing. He was glad that it was Dick she was going to marry, for then he would be seeing something of her. But a sigh took him unawares as he passed from the night into the house.

He was young enough to think that he held the situation well within his grasp. Had he known better, he would have thought twice before throwing down a challenge to any woman. But then he did not even know it was a challenge.

CHAPTER XVI

KELLY was comfortably settled by the library fire when Michael rejoined him. The decanter was on the table and an empty glass, and the little man's face looked rounder and redder than ever through the haze of smoke from a large Corona which he was visibly enjoying. He had taken Michael at his word and made himself thoroughly comfortable. With a nod and a smile, Michael pulled a chair up to the other side of the fire and started filling his pipe.

Describing his encounter with Dr. Capper, Kelly said: "He's a vulture of a man, that. Murder is meat and drink to him—maybe it will prove his poison, too, some day. I could not get much out of him this time, though I did all I knew to draw him."

What he did not mention was the cold-blooded confidence of the man which had left behind the unpleasant feeling that the little doctor was holding something up his sleeve.

"Sure the little beast will meet with a sticky end," he continued. "He was nearly done in once in East London. . . . Och! it's the limut, and it's not his job annyway."

He spoke with some heat, the brogue slipping out of him, to the temporary extinction of his Yankee twang, and Michael concluded that his interview with the doctor had met with no success.

Kelly had begun his inquiries by visiting Mongini in his shop, where he found Peters in earnest conversation

with the carpenter. The fact that Peters had troubled to explain his presence was sufficient cause in Kelly's mind to assume that he was up to no good ; and if that were so, then he reckoned it must be something in which Mongini was also involved. Therefore there might be something of interest in the association of these two, and the clue was worth following up from both ends. But, he added, there was a big gap in between, and it would be unwise to neglect any possible means of neutralising any evidence which the prosecution might adduce. There was propaganda, for one thing. 'The Room of Death' was a headline which intrigued him greatly, and he could fill a good poster with that.

"Say what you like, we all of us like our thrill," he theorised. "We are not much past the shillingshocker stage, or our little pet shiver down the spine."

Here Michael suggested drily that they might get it too, before their watch of the night was over, and the other gave a laugh. He had forgotten about that, but it would make good copy and he would see to it himself.

"I'll begin to write it up now," he announced. His face was creased in smiles as he pulled out a pencil and began to write on the back of an envelope.

Then Peters entered with the post, presenting it to Michael in a solemn silence, and leaving the room without a word.

One of Michael's letters was from Warburton, the old family solicitor, in reply to certain questions regarding Marley's will. Now, an examination of the safe had disclosed no indications of a tampering with the contents, save for that broken elastic band from a bundle of papers which were otherwise in perfect order. But, as will be remembered, M'Kerrel had found a charred fragment of parchment among the ashes on the hearth, with only part of a word legible—'queath'—presumably the ter-

mination of a word not likely to be used except in some testamentary document. There was therefore the obvious inference that the murderer should be one interested in the destruction of a codicil, or of some freshly drafted will ; one, at the same time, who was intimately aware of the position of affairs. This must lead to an almost overwhelming condemnation of Dick, taken in conjunction with the unfortunate chain of events which had arisen through his raising money on the reversion of his uncle's estate. But as far as Michael knew, Dick and he were the only two aware of the confession made to Marley ; and he had warned Dick on no account to admit this, thus leaving it to the prosecution to prove that the murdered man was cognisant of his nephew's folly on the night of the murder, and thereby strengthening the supposition that a codicil had been signed at the last moment disinheriting Dick. But there was not much comfort to be gained from this. Already, for all Michael knew, the police might have cleared up this point to their own satisfaction. And he knew, as well as though he had seen it done himself, that M'Kerrel had returned to the safe to record what finger-prints he might find there, of the result of which he must remain in ignorance till the day of the trial.

This, then, had been the occasion of Michael's writing to Warburton, who was wintering in Egypt for his health, and the answers to his questions were as favourable as could be expected. For, after expressing the horror and grief he felt at the death of his old friend, Mr. Warburton recollected having prepared the draft of a fresh will and submitting it to Marley for approval. By this draft it was proposed to exclude the di Contis altogether. In Mr. Warburton's opinion, this decision was due, not only to the death of di Conti's only son, but also to an insulting letter subsequently received from the di Conti connection,

a letter which had very properly incensed Marley. But the draft will had not been received back, nor had Mr. Warburton heard anything further from his client in the matter. He knew of no further testamentary document prepared for or contemplated by his client.

Michael explained to Kelly the contents of the letter and the circumstances leading up to it, but without disclosing the fact of Dick's confession.

Kelly flicked the ash from his cigar and reflected. "Has Mr. Warburton any reason to believe that this draft was signed?" he asked.

"No. He can only swear to the preparation of the draft—which cannot be found, by the way—and to Marley's expressed intentions in the matter. Poor old Warburton was taken ill very suddenly, and was unable to transact any business about that time."

"Ch't! That's a pity. The prosecution will try to prove a codicil was destroyed by your friend for reasons stated, while we can impute a motive for its destruction by quite another agency. They produce young Marley, while we can produce no one so far. But we can produce evidence of the existence of a draft, and they can only assume theirs. . . . Yes, it is a wash-out. In that respect, I mean," he added. "And I always say, if you cannot refute, neutralise."

Michael smiled a little grimly. "You ought to have been a K.C. yourself, Kelly."

"An investigator's is the better part," said Kelly; "only give me a man with whom I can collaborate."

After dinner Michael wrote a letter to Miss Favoril. He had forgotten to tell her that Marley House was being shut up, and that he was returning to town the following day. He had promised to keep her posted, should any new development arise. 'Don't be discouraged,' he concluded, 'and keep smiling. We will solve the mystery

soon and free old Dick.' He guessed at what the girl was passing through in spite of all her brave concealment of it, loving Dick as she did ; and this spurred him on to fresh endeavour and made it all the more imperative that the whole miserable affair should be cleared up at once.

Peters entered to ask if there were any further orders for him, and, receiving a reply in the negative, said good-night and vanished. None of the servants had been informed of the night vigil, and shortly after Peters had retired and the house grown quiet, Michael and Kelly made their way along to the old wing, fortifying themselves against the cold with overcoats.

There was a gigantic receptacle for fuel in the alcove, and a small fire was set alight to counteract the dank, vault-like feeling in the air. So small was the fire kept that only a faint glow of light ringed the alcove, the hall itself being shrouded in darkness. The two men conversed for a time in whispers ; but silence fell upon them presently and they sat very still, each wrapped in his own thoughts. The fire flickered low, then died out in the vast hearth, such being Michael's intention that it should. But before the light vanished altogether, Kelly's face could be seen to have grown a shade less rosy, and there was a nervous tension about it that did not escape the other's notice. It was curious to note the superstition of his Irish ancestry at variance with a man's lifelong training.

In the gloom which settled down upon them there was no denying that brooding unrest as of something impending—some horror latent, and not yet realised. Subjective, let us call it, or mental suggestion, or what you will. But there it was, whatever the cause.

Kelly stirred in his chair, and Michael glanced sharply in his direction. " 'The spider's web'—not a bad name

for it either," he whispered back in reply, with the ghost of a laugh.

Silence again. Every now and then the hush was broken by the dirge of the wind as it moaned to itself in the old yew hedge flanking the family vault. Unimpressible as he was, Michael's thoughts nevertheless strayed to old Jimmy, buried there, and who had come to his end in this room of death. As time wore on his limbs grew cramped ; he feared to change his position, but his mind reached a high pitch of concentration and his hearing became so acute that he could detect the slightest sound.

The hall was pitch black now, with a blackness as of velvet and almost as palpable. Somewhere in the distance a dog barked. Kelly started up, then sank back in his chair once more with a stifled sigh.

Silence again.

Michael could not say how long they sat thus. Minutes passed, or it may have been æons in eternity. Time had ceased to be. A sense of unreality swept over him, pressing down upon his consciousness. In his own words, as expressed to me long afterwards : "I, Michael Frayne—an unimaginative bloke—became as it were detached from the body. The world had gone from underneath me and I was looking down on the scene from above, viewing myself as I sat on a chair in the darkness. . . . It is all rot, I know. I must have dozed off, and the shadow of that old dream came back to me. . . . But there it is." And he passed it off with a laugh, but not to another soul would he have admitted so much.

He did not know how long the feeling lasted—seconds or centuries. Then suddenly a sound brought him to his senses—a sound that froze the blood. He could hear Kelly's breathing, but though the two were seated close together, their faces were hidden from one another in

the darkness. He stretched out a warning hand in his fear that the other was going to move. And so they waited. . . .

The world had grown very silent again. Small sounds carried far; a tiny rustle in the ivy outside as a bird stirred in the leaves; a rat at the far end of the hall, faintly scratching its way along the wainscoting. Then all silent as the grave once more.

Suddenly again the same sound that seemed to have grown out of nothing. Kelly's hands were gripping the arms of his chair, tightly and more tightly, until the veins corded out, and he grew numb with the ache to move. A soft padding. A faint scraping on a stone step—another. A third, up and nearer. Kelly was tense and quivering, as a man about to hurl himself at death. Michael was praying the other might not move; he dare not even whisper.

Silence. A breathless expectancy of horror. The curtain rustled. Then, softly, out of nothing, a ghostly impact. . . .

“Holy saints!” Kelly leaped to his feet, unable to hold himself an instant longer.

Michael jumped up, flashing on his electric torch. “You fool!” he cried, gripping Kelly's arm in a fury. “Oh, you fool!” and he flung the other from him. The madness passed, but for one moment it had been a murderous rage which had come upon him in that room of death.

He rushed to the portière, tore it aside, and peered into the blackness below. There was nothing to be seen. A sudden icy breath of air, a fluttering sound, and all was silent as before. Down the stairs he clattered, Kelly at his heels, and out by the conservatory door into the shrubbery beyond. Working over every inch of ground with a torchlight, they found not a trace of anything, and not a sound arose save that of the night-wind among the

trees. At last they had to give it up and admit defeat.

“Not a trace of mortal man or beast, and that’s a fact. What can it have been at all? ”

Kelly’s face was almost pale. Michael scowled at him.

“Are you a detective or a—‘spook-shifter ’? Isn’t it a fact that a murderer will sometimes revisit the scene of his crime, if for no other motive than that? . . . Either that, or else, there was nothing but what our thoughts made of it.”

But poor little Kelly was already so ashamed that Michael repented in an instant of his words. After all, it was largely a matter of temperament. He must not forget either, the curious spell cast over himself in that room which begot spells.

“Sorry, old man, I was pretty near it myself,” he said in a changed tone. “I am beginning to think there was nothing to it after all. Only the weird sounds of the old place, and its associations. It was like a dream the way it fitted in, and like a dream it leaves no traces. . . . No, there was nothing to it but our thoughts. I’m sorry, Kelly.”

“For nearly murdering me? Well, that’s all right. I could just about murder myself for giving way like that.

And so ended the first night-watch.

CHAPTER XVII

DICK had been committed for trial on the charge of murder, and was lodged in the county gaol.

He was pacing up and down his cell. "No, I can't face it," he muttered to himself. "It is this awful waiting," and he kept on repeating: "This awful waiting."

Michael had said he would see him through; and this, from Michael, had been enough. It had seemed at the time to leave no room for despair. But the iron of restraint and of inaction bit deeper as the days dragged on, and bitter moods followed; moods when he thought himself deserted of his friends; moods when he conjured up a mass of evidence piled up in a hopeless array against him, and then in his thoughts he would enter the condemned cell and finally pass on pinioned to the gallows' foot. For his brain was an active one, and imagination ate into it like a canker. But there were times, too, when, numbed with exhaustion, his mind would become a blank and he could think of nothing at all.

Dick had been in prison for some days before Michael obtained an order to see him.

It was a perfect morning, with a bright sun and a crispness in the air, one of those exquisite days in late autumn which sets the blood racing in the veins and makes of life a good thing. The glowing tints of a distant coppice, the glorious russet of a beech hedge, with the deep blue of a cloudless sky above—this was the world into which Michael sped on his way to visit Dick.

What a contrast! he reflected. All this beauty of God's creation, and that which the created have made of it. And at thought of Dick lying there, shut out from all this world of sunshine, the light and colour passed from the landscape, and the world grew old and grey.

He was prepared for a change in Dick, but not for the shock that awaited him. It was not that the healthy tan had left Dick's face, nor that he was looking pale and drawn, with great dark rings under his eyes. It was his look of utter despair which went to Michael's very heart.

He had no sooner entered the cell than Dick asked: "How long are they going to keep me here? I cannot stand this waiting. It is not death I am frightened of—it is this awful waiting. . . ." He searched Michael's face.

It was with difficulty that Michael met the question he had dreaded. The answer he had to give was so pitifully inadequate; and as he spoke he realised—for it was difficult for a man of his nature to put himself in Dick's place—what it all meant to one of Dick's temperament.

At the end of it Dick broke out: "I am game for any sort of fate in the open. But here I am like a rat in a trap. I can't go on like this; I tell you I can't."

His eyes kept moving about like an animal looking for a way of escape. He kept passing his hands through his short, crisp hair.

"It may be a longer job than we thought, but we'll have you out of it soon, old fellow. Don't ever think we're forgetting you." Michael spoke gruffly enough, to conceal the feeling that was in him.

But Dick was not listening; a sudden, impotent rage had seized him. "What in God's name have they put me here for?" He clenched his fists and resumed his pacing up and down. "I've done nothing to deserve it. Damn them!"

Suddenly the irony of it struck him, and he laughed ; but that laugh, so unlike Dick's, struck deeper than his anger into Michael's heart.

"I'll be thinking myself guilty if I stay here much longer. . . . Michael, tell me what sort of a chance have I got of getting out ? The truth, old fellow ! "

He grew calmer as he listened to what was being done, and all that had transpired since his arrest. He sat down with his head sunk forward ; only when Michael had finished did he look up.

"And Esmée—how is she taking it ? "

"In her own brave way. She has been just splendid." And Michael related in greater detail what she had said and done.

Dick spoke of his love for her and of his hopes, the resilience of his nature beginning to reassert itself. "Such a plucky little soul !" he exclaimed. "Rides straight at a difficulty as she does at her fences. You know, there's no stopping her when she settles down to it."

Michael encouraged him to speak of her with a word here and there to keep him going, till Dick himself turned the topic :

"How are the horses ? And old Larry, how is he doing ? Is the keeper seeing to his dope all right ? " This in reference to a retriever well stricken in years and rheumatism, but much beloved, as were all Dick's dogs and horses. And so he went on talking of these until the time was nearly up. Then he rose, laying a hand affectionately on the other's shoulder. He said : "Good old Mickey ! You've been a great brick. You've given me fresh hopes and courage to go on with. God bless you, old fellow."

He gave his friend's arm a squeeze. And had you seen Michael's eyes then you would have noticed in them that protective softness contradicting the sterner lines of his face.

"Look after that new hunter of mine, Mickey. He's got the makings of a top-notch in him. Try him ; I'd like you to. And don't forget old Larry—and Esmée, too. Don't forget any of them."

And Michael promised, faintly smiling to himself at the order in which his charges came.

He looked at his watch. His half-hour was nearly up, and there was that which he had still to remind Dick of. He glanced swiftly round the room. No sign of anyone listening ; all the same, he drew nearer to Dick, and lowered his voice to say :

"Don't on any account admit that you confessed to old Jimmy that night. You haven't, Dick, have you ? "

Dick shook his head. "But, by God, I shall never know if he forgave me. That will always remain."

"Of course he did. But only you and I must ever know—remember ! "

There came a sound of a footfall outside. Michael heard it and resumed his natural tone : "That's all right then. Well, old man, time's up. Keep smiling ; we'll soon have you out of here."

His own heart was heavy as lead, but he had cheered Dick up a bit, for when he left Dick was looking more comforted.

As he stepped out into the sunshine and the breeze, he glanced back at the dismal grey of the prison building, and his heart ached again as he thought of Dick, with all his love of the open, mewed up there. And there he was leaving him—the friend whom he loved more than his own immortal soul.

Returning to his rooms, he found a note from Bailey to say that he would look round again, later in the evening, and to suggest that they dine somewhere together, if Frayne happened to be at a loose end like himself.

Michael was feeling curiously depressed, and had been looking forward to a quiet dinner at home ; besides, he was half expecting Kelly to drop in later, if not for dinner. So he rang the bell and gave orders for dinner to be served in his sitting-room for all three.

It was shortly after six when Bailey arrived. He, too, looked tired and out of spirits, and seemed to welcome a quiet evening as much as Michael himself.

Their conversation drifted in time to the tragedy in which they were both so closely interested. Michael spoke of his visit to Dick, and presently he said :

“ Well, that is the third tragedy in the history of Marley, and it’s like to be the last.”

And he told Bailey how the servants, one and all, had refused to live in the place a day longer. There had been no alternative but to close it up, leaving it to Dick to do as he thought best with it as soon as he was at liberty once more. But he fancied Dick would never want to live in it again. He continued :

“ You must have seen the notoriety the Press has been giving to what they call ‘ The Room of Death.’ That in itself is sufficient to condemn the house in the eyes of all the serving world. I was unable to get a caretaker for love or money. Not one of them would look at it.”

Bailey leaned forward in his chair, gazing into the fire. “ Do you know, I cannot blame them,” he said. “ I should not care to take on the job myself. I have always felt there was something in it. You are a man of little imagination, but you surely cannot have helped noticing something of the sort yourself.”

Michael thought : ‘ What a nervous fellow he is, fidgeting about in his chair and never altogether at rest in all his body at any one time.’ There was, too, that nervous twitching of the face muscles which he had noticed before.

Poor Bailey! His was not the temperament to shake off easily the memory of the trenches, and the ghastly tragedy at Marley had made it worse.

"You know, Frayne, I almost envy you at times, never troubled by a nerve in that great body of yours. I do not suppose you even know what fear means. Still," he hesitated, looking down into the fire with a curious unfathomable look in his eyes, "you miss a lot, too. . . . Terror has always been at the root of my soul; even as a small boy I can remember that. Not fear, you understand? But terror. There is a difference, though I don't suppose you will grasp it. One thing I do mean is that I am not easily frightened in the physical sense. Then, it is not a thing that paralyses thought; it is something which stimulates the mind as nothing else can. It is like a drug. I have knocked about in a lot of queer places; but I knew it best in France as a sort of ecstasy in the blood." He broke off suddenly with a laugh. "Forgive me. I am boring you, I fear, with my musings."

But it more than bored Michael, all this psychology; it filled him with a mild contempt. 'Examining their insides' is what he termed it, of those who were given to it.

He looked at the clock and yawned. "Well," he said, "I have got the fear now—that Kelly is going to be late for dinner. We had better start without him." He rang the bell, then stood with his back to the fire, stretching the muscles of his great frame. In answer to Bailey's query he explained who Kelly was.

"We have discovered nothing so far," he added.

"As I told you before, you will find that the solution of it lies there—in the old hall. I'm sure of it, Frayne; not in searching about for phantom di Contis. It is a psychical expert you want, not a criminal one. It is there I'll be able to help you yet, I hope."

When he chose, Bailey could be a most fascinating companion, being unusually well-read; besides, having travelled in odd corners of the globe, he had picked up many a curious bit of information which was of interest. He had a distinct leaning towards the occult, but he now avoided the topic in deference to his host's pronounced dislike of the subject; and as dinner progressed he threw off, too, his morbidly introspective mood. Michael listened to him with increasing attention, so that he quite regretted the interruption caused by Kelly's arrival shortly after ten o'clock; but there was nothing lacking in the heartiness with which he greeted the little man.

"Well, Kelly, how goes it? Draw up your chair to the fire and give us your news. . . . You don't know one another, so let me introduce you."

"Pretty parky to-night," Kelly observed, after settling himself to his satisfaction. He regretted his inability to come to dinner, explaining the cause that had detained him.

When Michael asked if anything of importance had come to light, he noticed Kelly dart a look at Bailey and then back to himself again. So he said:

"Bailey knows all about it, Kelly. He was at Marley the night of the murder, you know; apart from that, as a friend, he is deeply interested in the case."

Kelly then informed them that he had news of a di Conti said to have been in Australia in the early part of his life. He had died in Italy, and had a son who was killed in the war; so that, as far as they went, the particulars fitted in. He added:

"I was able to get no further than that, except that there is none of the family now left in that part of Italy. But there is reason to believe that some connection of theirs has recently moved to England."

Michael's face lit up. "Kelly," he exclaimed, "this is great!"

"Well, it is a step in the right direction; at least, it seems to be."

Kelly apologised for talking shop; but if Mr. Bailey had no objection, he would like to put to him certain questions regarding the tragedy itself.

"It is always the details that count, even those which appear to be of relative unimportance. And you, Mr. Bailey, might be able to throw some fresh light on the case—some little thing which may have escaped Mr. Frayne."

But Bailey was unable to add much to the particulars which Michael had already furnished. He had noticed nothing unusual on the occasion on which he had last seen Marley alive. No, he had heard no shot on the night of the murder. His bedroom was next to Frayne's, both of them a considerable way from the old hall. Dick Marley's room was on the other side of the passage and almost opposite.

"But I'll tell you what—there's something deuced curious about that old hall, as I've just been telling Frayne. Have you noticed it yourself, Mr. Kelly?"

"It's a rummy old place, from what I could see of it." This Kelly admitted reluctantly, with a flicker of his eyelids as his glance encountered Michael's.

But an answering smile reassured him. His folly was a safe secret with Frayne.

CHAPTER XVIII

M'KERREL is one of the least demonstrative men I have ever known ; yet he is, somehow, one of the most likeable. His friendships are of the reluctant order ; once formed—but only after the growth of time, mark you—they are of the stuff that lasts. When he takes his ease, and when the whisky is to his liking, it would be hard to find a more genial companion anywhere. He is a widower, and likely to remain so ; he lives for his work now, and for that son of his whom I have mentioned before.

There is a certain restaurant in Soho where, seated at his favourite table in the corner, you will commonly find him at lunch ; a place, by the way, which has become known as ' M'Kerrel's pub ' by his intimates. Michael, too, is to be found there not infrequently, and on a Saturday it is his almost invariable custom ; in fact, it has become an unwritten law that he should join M'Kerrel for luncheon on that day, should nothing arise to prevent it. Sometimes I drop in and take part in their discussions, which range from Plato to Pelmanism, from cabbages to kings. But criminology and the inner workings of the human mind in general are the topics which chiefly absorb their attention.

It was the first time the two had met since the arrest. M'Kerrel's manner was not effusive—it seldom is—but on this occasion there was a slight constraint noticeable at first. It soon wore off, however, for their friendship had too great a depth in it to fall even a temporary victim to any incident of the day's work, however great.

They were seated over their coffee when, in a lull in the conversation, Michael suddenly turned to M'Kerrel.

"Bob M'Kerrel," said he, facing his friend squarely, "what are the chances?"

M'Kerrel shot a glance at him from under his shaggy eyebrows. A smaller man would have temporised; not so M'Kerrel. He understood the question, and he answered it in his own blunt way:

"Speaking unofficially, there is no getting away from the fact that a very strong case has been established against your friend." A roughness in his voice concealed the kindly sympathy that lay beneath.

Michael leaned forward, biting hard on the end of his cigar: "As bad as that? It can't be! The evidence is so circumstantial."

"And isn't all evidence circumstantial in a murder case? Unless the murderer is caught red-handed—and you know how seldom that is so. You see, my friend, circumstantial evidence can be quite convincing. For instance, a trout in the milk, to quote Thoreau's example of it. It is a fact that circumstance may be shown to meet the case of more than one suspect in the same crime. But here the Crown is working on a very strong motive, as you must know for yourself. A very strong motive indeed," M'Kerrel repeated with a sigh. "That is the worst of it."

"But you don't believe——"

"I don't believe, and I don't disbelieve, Michael. That is my attitude. You ask me as friend to friend——"

But Michael cut him short: "No, as man to man."

"Still, it is a matter touching my work—and there I'm neutral, as you might say. As a friend, I am truly sorry. But there is no blinking the facts, and no getting away from the motive."

"Oh, damn the motive!"

“Quite so,” and M’Kerrel gave a dry smile. “And at times it is the motive itself that damns in the dock. I admit that the question of motive is a very complicated one at times. And I’m not saying your friend has not got a chance. He has. That chance known as the benefit of the doubt which a British jury—to give it its due—views in a broader light these days. Then, in spite of our little doctor, there is just the remote chance of suicide to weigh in with them. And there is all that ‘mystery’ talk of which the papers have been making so much copy these past few days. I am not trying to comfort you. But,” and he paused and eyed his friend keenly for a moment, “just one more grain in the scale against him, and I would not give much for his chances.”

“But, Mac, it is an absurd charge for anyone to make who knows anything about him. I put it to you. Let us get away from the case, and suppose for a moment. There is your son : you would not suspect him of any crime under the sun.”

“Absolutely not.”

Michael leaned forward with his elbow on the table, and said, speaking very earnestly : “No more would I. Very well then ; but just suppose he were accused of cattle-maiming, let us say, and that everything were against him. And suppose you had seen him with your own eyes leaving the field with blood on his hands, just after the event. Would you still believe him innocent ? ”

“Aye ! I would that.”

“Why ? ”

And without a moment’s thought M’Kerrel replied : “Because I would know he was incapable of such a thing. I see what you are driving at : the knowledge of a man’s nature against the circumstance, or coincidence, of the case. But circumstantial evidence has got to stand, Michael, as things go. Innocent men have been hanged

before now, though such a miscarriage of justice is nothing like so common as some sensational fiction would have you to suppose. Yet," he admitted, "there is something in what you say. And who can tell? The psychometrical treatment of a case may be a possibility of the future. Even now more attention is being paid to the state of the mind than used to be given to it; but much greater progress must be made in the labyrinth of psychology and metaphysics before we can arrive at anything approaching an acceptable analysis. What we are still concerned with is objective evidence, and so it must continue until some sort of meter of the mind is devised."

A slow smile stealing across Michael's face erased the sterner lines of it. "I thought you would see it like that, Mac. Now tell me: do you really think Dick Marley is guilty?"

M'Kerrel's eyes twinkled. "I am neutral, as I said. But speaking unofficially, I cannot deny the feeling that he is as innocent as you or I. Otherwise I would not have——" But he did not finish the sentence.

He was lost in thought for a moment, his dreaming Celtic eyes fixed on the haze of tobacco smoke above him. At last he spoke:

"I am not telling you anything you are not aware of yourself, Michael. I am simply marshalling known facts. First, then, every probability points to murder, not suicide. Second, young Marley had every reason to forestall a codicil which might have disinherited him. Third, he was the last to be seen with his uncle before the crime. Fourth, there is that Colt automatic he had received back from the gun-makers the very day of the murder—we found it concealed in his room." He stopped and examined the long white ash so carefully preserved at his cigar-end.

So Dick had hidden it after all! Michael showed not a sign, except that the lines on his face deepened.

M'Kerrel resumed: "The fact that the barrel was clean means nothing, of course. There was time enough to clean it, as the murderer naturally would have done. Man, it was a peety! . . . Of course, the theory is that the murder was committed with a pistol of like calibre, and that the murderer slipped silently round the curtain, shooting his man from behind before he could stir. There was no sign of a struggle. Naturally there is a strong suspicion, as you know for yourself, that the dead man's pistol was substituted for the murderer's by one who knew the secret of the panel. And thus an attempt was made to give the semblance of suicide to what can only have been murder."

M'Kerrel finished off what remained in his glass. Then Michael broke in:

"You have marshalled your facts. Now I will marshal mine."

"No. Better reserve that for Kelly. And if you cannot get much positive evidence, then make the most of the negative."

An idea passing through Michael's mind just then, he put it into words: "Mac, that afternoon at Marley, after you left us, you were trying to obtain such fingerprints as might be remaining on the safe."

M'Kerrel grew instantly grave. "I am not telling you anything you don't already know," he answered, with scarcely a trace of rebuke in his tones.

Michael sat up, squaring his great shoulders. "Forgive me," he said. "I had forgotten."

"Nothing to forgive between friends," was all M'Kerrel said. His was an understanding mind.

There was a newsboy, as they passed into the street, shouting out: "The Marley mystery—all the latest!"

Michael bought a paper and opened it out. 'The Room of Death,' and 'Was there a Sinister Influence at Work?' He was met with these in thick black type.

"Wherein I perceive the hand of Kelly," said M'Kerrel, glancing over his friend's shoulder and chuckling quietly.

It was a dull November afternoon; the rain was coming down with a dull persistency.

"A beast of a day!" Michael observed. "Come into my rooms and have a smoke, M'Kerrel."

And M'Kerrel assenting, they entered upon Jermyn Street. But there a surprise awaited them.

CHAPTER XIX

THE surprise took the shape of Miss Esmée herself—a very pleasant form it was, too.

She greeted Michael in her airy fashion as he entered his sitting-room: “Hullo! Dad and I are up in town for an ecclesiastical conference. I escaped. Here I am, and I want you to tell me the very latest.”

She got it all out without pausing to take breath, and without giving Michael a chance to present M’Kerrel, who was standing somewhere in the background regarding the girl in a solemn amazement.

“First of all let me present to you Mr. M’Kerrel—you have seen him before, I believe.” Michael made this latter statement with a grim little smile to himself.

“How d’ye do?” she said in a voice of icy formality. Then she turned abruptly to Michael, and her eyes were anxious.

“Any good news?”

He shook his head.

“No bad?”

“None at all!”

Her lips were parted to speak, but he broke in: “This is the horrid man from Scotland Yard whom you saw at Marley Pryors. You remember?”

“Michael!” she exclaimed.

“Yes, it’s true. A horrid man you called him.”

“I never——” But instead of finishing, she cast a look at him from under her lashes. ‘Very well,’ it seemed

to say. 'Just you wait.' There was a pink glow in her cheeks, her eyes shone.

M'Kerrel's face lit up as he watched her. There was a look of appreciation in his sleepy blue eyes, and this may have had something to do with it—for, womanlike, the glance did not escape her notice; or it may only have been M'Kerrel's smile. At all events, it is a fact that her manner had thawed as she turned to him and said:

"It is only Michael who is being horrid, Mr. M'Kerrel. I don't think you ever could be. Not really." And she held out her hand to him in the frank, impulsive way that endeared her to everyone.

But it was M'Kerrel who was the revelation. The polished courtesy of his bearing towards a woman was what astonished Michael. From where did he get that innate chivalry of a bygone age—this son of the outer islands?

Miss Esmée was doing most of the talking. Indeed, it is seldom otherwise, the little chatterbox that she is! But her voice is soft and there is a hidden laugh in it, so let it pass. M'Kerrel listened with a grave smile, and attentively. He was finding it a pleasure to watch the light and shade that flitted across her face as she talked.

"It is only a matter of time until we prove him innocent. Mr. Frayne and I are on the track of the real murderer." She then proceeded to narrate for M'Kerrel's benefit her shadowing of the assassins through the forest. "Of course," she admitted, "they may only have been accomplices, though I think myself they were the murderers—or at least that one of them was."

Her violet eyes grew round with mystery.

They talked for a time, and her liking for M'Kerrel grew more apparent. Stranger still that such a man should forsake the reserve of a lifetime, and respond. When he took his leave it was with an old-world grace.

"If I could be of any assistance to you," he said, "I should be indeed happy." And he bowed over her hand.

"What a nice old thing!" she exclaimed, after he had left. "He looked as if he were going to kiss my hand as they did in the old days."

Presently she said: "Were you pleased to see me, Michael?"

"Yes—and now I'll see you home."

She began to laugh at that.

"What's the matter?" he inquired.

"Oh, nothing!" And that is all the reply she would give him.

Her eyes grew very bright as they passed out into the street.

"I do get such a big pain at my heart when I come into the open. I think of him shut up there——"

There was a little break in her voice. But when she looked up at his face: "Poor old Mickey," she murmured in the dear, sympathetic way of hers. "I know you are feeling it the same as I am. And we both understand, don't we?"

Before she reached her destination she slipped an arm through his in the darkness. She said:

"Dear old person, it is such a comfort to have you. You are rather a nice lean-upon, you know, when you don't happen to be formidable."

CHAPTER XX

SOME days elapsed without anything of note occurring. Kelly was following up his clue as energetically as ever, but was unable to report further progress ; and the lull that ensued, with its powerless inactivity, was beginning to shake even Michael's calm.

The sands were running out without the accomplishment of anything tangible in Dick's favour ; and the mystery which had at first baffled was beginning to fill Michael now with a vague dread. He was not a man susceptible to moods, but the sight of Dick in prison, and the knowledge of Esmée's anxiety, were both affecting him to a greater extent than he himself realised. In spite of a somewhat stern, uncompromising outlook on life in general, he was tender-hearted where his friends were concerned.

The feeling left him in the course of a busy day ; but as night came on, and he returned to his solitary chambers, there was time to think, and then it was that the oppression would return to him with a greater force than ever.

His mind was besieged by questions, and he kept turning over and over again the unsolved riddle of old Jimmy's death, marshalling facts and looking at them from every angle of vision. He had a fairly analytical mind ; and if he never turned it inwards upon himself, at least his deductions were free enough of emotion to be logical.

To-night he was tormented with theories. There was

something troubling him, of which he was subconsciously aware all the time, something which he should be able to grasp. Every now and then he seemed to be getting near to it, but it always eluded him at the last. He undressed and got into a dressing-gown, then he made up a good fire and sat beside it, smoking. At first he tried to read, but for once his mind refused to detach itself and concentrate on the print. So he gave it up at last and yielded to the tyranny of his thoughts, which, as before, led him nowhere.

It must have been some time after ten when the telephone bell began to ring : softly at first, then breaking into a fusillade of sound. When he took up the receiver he did not recognise the voice at first, nor were the words distinct, being broken into by a buzzing over the wire that was peculiarly irritating at that time of night. At last, in a more or less clear interval, he realised that it was Esmée who was trying to talk to him from Marley Pryors.

"Oh, it is infuriating!" she said. "I've been trying to get you since seven o'clock, and there has always been something wrong with the beastly thing. . . ."

Buzz-buzz. . . . Stop! As if in support of the statement, her voice suddenly faded out and was no more.

"Have you finished there?" inquired a sleepy voice from Exchange.

Michael was thoroughly roused now. He snapped back : "Not begun yet. Hold the line, please. . . . Hullo!"

"Hullo!" echoed back faintly from an infinite point in space. Next instant Esmée's voice sounded as though she had been speaking into his ear ; the contrast was startling.

"Where did you get to?"

"Nowhere."

"Oh, bother! But look here, Michael, let me tell you about it before this horrid buzzing starts again. It is dreadfully important."

"I'm listening."

"Now do just as I tell you. . . . I want you to motor down first thing to-morrow morning."

"Yes?" said Michael. He was wondering how it could be managed; there was work he would find a difficulty to lay aside. "Would no other day do?" he asked.

"No, it would *not*! . . . Bring a bag in case you are delayed overnight. And bring a revolver and an electric torch. I think that's all. But don't forget the revolver."

"Yes. But what is it all about?"

"A clue. Tell you about it when we meet. I am so excited. Good-night. Don't forget anything."

"But——" he began. Then—

Buzz-buzz went the telephone.

"Good-night," from the other end of creation. Buzz again.

"Time's up"—snappily from Exchange. And that was all. No way of getting out of it now.

There was nothing for it but to postpone his work, and be off bright and early the next morning in his little car, on a quest the meaning of which he was in total ignorance. Hers was a summons he had pledged himself to honour, so there he left it without further speculation upon its possibilities.

It was a nice fresh morning, though the horizon was ringed with a haze. Once clear of the heavier traffic, he let the engine out, and shot along at racing speed. The car was running smoothly, there was a pleasant nip in the air, and the speed in itself was enough to stir the blood in a man's veins.

He arrived at Marley Pryors shortly after eleven, and at the gate he encountered the old vicar, setting out on a morning tramp.

"Good-morning, Frayne," he said in his pleasant, indecisive voice. "My daughter is expecting you, I believe, and is all impatience. I have only a vague idea what it is about. Doubtless she will be able to enlighten you, but I must confess to finding her rather bewildering at times. But there, I am of a past age, and confess my inability to keep pace with the times. I find myself losing touch. . . ." And he tailed off with the lack of finality which distinguished his scholarly mind: "See you at lunch," and with his vague, kindly smile he was gone.

Esmée was standing at the door of the vicarage, the light shining on her head. She waved to Michael as he turned the corner of the drive, at the same time shaking her head as if in despair of ever accelerating his speed.

"I thought you were never coming," she said, while he stood, immensely massive and silent, looking down on her from a frowning height.

She broke into a smile, and continued:

"Never mind. Come along. I'm dying to tell you all about it. You've had breakfast, of course?" Michael nodded. "Well, just wait a moment while I get my hat on. We are going for a walk."

"Please, may I ask what for?" Michael queried.

"Presently. Just have a little patience now."

And with that she left him. He listened to the flying patter of her feet up the stairs, and the hurried banging of her door.

They were well out of the village, on the open road, and in broad daylight; nothing larger than a blade of grass to conceal any potential plotter. Even Billy, the fox-terrier could find nothing to bark at. Yet she glanced carefully about her and lowered her voice before saying, with an immense impressment:

"A real clue at last, Michael." Her eyes were dancing with untold secrets.

He was dying to hear it, he whispered back, and her eyes grew brighter still.

"It's like this," she began. "I had occasion to go round by the carpenter's shop yesterday afternoon in regard to a bookshelf which Dad had sent for repairs. Mongini was there himself. He was reading a letter ; but when he saw me enter he tore it up as he turned to attend to me. I told him what I had come about, and would he please see to it himself. . . . And it worked, Michael, beautifully. You see, I knew his workshop lay across an open yard and that he would have to leave me for a minute alone in the shop. The instant he was gone I picked up a handful of his torn letter, and had just managed to cram it into my pocket when he returned. . . . I spent the whole afternoon piecing the bits together ; then when I had succeeded, I telephoned to you. It was well on to midnight before I could get through—it was so exasperating ! "

"It must have been—for the vicar too."

"Oh, Dad—nothing ever ruffles him. He is wrapped up in his books, and is just the most absent-minded old darling you could possibly wish for."

She pulled from her pocket a well-thumbed scrap of paper, neatly pasted together on a backing of cardboard.

"See, here it is," she said.

"By Jove ! How jolly clever of you."

"Oh, it was nothing," she said, smiling upon the ground in a rather pleased way with her small self.

Michael examined the sheet, and this is what he read :

"Hanger's Spinney. . . . Wednesday evening, 5 o'clock."

The spinney in question was in Marley grounds. Michael had often shot the covert.

"It is quite near to the old wing where they are meeting," she remarked meaningly.

"But why should they want to have a nocturnal meeting

at all, when they are at liberty to do all the plotting they please in comfort, by the fire ? ”

“Don’t you see ? ”

Michael did not.

“Well, let me finish explaining,” she continued, breathlessly. “Strange lights have been seen about the old wing, you know, and in the shrubbery.”

Yes, Michael knew, he had read it in the papers. “Only some of Kelly’s phantasies,” he said.

“No. The village people have seen it too, and they have been talking. Mrs. Stubbs, the constable’s wife, was telling me about it only the other day. Her husband had seen it with his own eyes. Now ! . . . And here is the other scrap of paper I haven’t shown you yet.”

This time she read it aloud to him :

“‘—enough to catch the 6—’. And that,” she said, with triumph, “that means—in time to catch the 6.40 train to London, as that is the only train from Marley between six and seven. *Now* do you see how it all coincides ? ”

Michael still did not see.

“Why, of course, because Mongini is meeting this di Conti man (whom Mr. Kelly tells us is known to have come to England) at 5 p.m. near the haunted wing, and then they are travelling up to London by the 6.40 train.”

“Yes, but what for ? And why do they meet in Hanger’s Spinney of all places ? There is no one to murder there. . . . I don’t understand.”

“It is quite easy,” she said, knitting her brows together. Then suddenly her face lit up. “Why, you see, they are going to break into the house.”

He was beginning to wonder himself if there could be any organised pilfering going on. The house had been pretty well dismantled, and portable articles of value stored in the nearest repository. But the old panelling

remained, and the famous Marley carving. Taken collectively the matter began to assume a sufficient importance in his estimate of it to call for some inquiry, and he made a note of it for future action.

She looked at him, and said with a wise little smile :

“I have worked it all out. You have only got to come with me and do just what you’re told.”

He laughed.

“All right, Sherlock. I’m quite ready to play Watson to your Holmes. Only it is necessary—sometimes—to get down to details.”

“You leave all that to me,” she begged, “and don’t let us waste any more time.”

Then she told him the rest of it. And of all the proposals she had yet made, this was certainly the maddest, he thought. For what she was suggesting was that he, Michael, should join her in the tracking of Mongini and Co.—a pursuit that might conceivably take them to town, and last well through the night, apart altogether from any element of personal risk which she might be incurring.

What explanation, he asked, was she to give to her father for such an absence? And yet she was most insistent upon this very point: that she who had been the one to find the clue should have the right to join in the follow-up.

He protested, and she said, with a trace of pity in her voice :

“Poor old Mickey, you may as well give in at once. It saves so much time.”

He refused—he would go alone.

“But indeed, I will not let you. I will put it all right with Dad, never fear. Just leave me to manage him.”

He had no doubt of her ability to manage the vicar, or any other member of the sterner sex. But that was hardly the point.

“Please, Mickey. Oh, *please* say ‘Yes.’”

You can see how he was torn in two directions. Defiance he could deal with, but he felt so helpless in her hands when she started her cozening.

He walked on for a bit, and in silence.

"You are so reckless," he said at last. "More so than a man. I daresay a woman is, in these things. A man stops to think——"

But she broke in with a laugh :

"Do you think I can't look after myself—a girl who has driven a motor in France, and all sorts of things ? "

He was thinking hard, and his face clouded over.

"I don't say it is not worth looking into. Anything is, when we are so much at sea."

"Then what are you making all the fuss about ? "

"You," he retorted, slowly beginning to smile.

"Me ! How ? I'm not a bit frightened, if that's what you mean." The calmness with which her eyes met his, the poise of her little head, thrown proudly back, were evidence enough that no physical menace, at anyrate, would daunt her.

"Suppose we miss the last train back ? "

"Suppose we do ?—then I can sleep the night with my aunt in London. I have already written, telling her to expect me."

"But your father ? "

"I have said I could manage him. But if you want to know, I shall leave a note to be delivered to him in case I don't return. He knows me, and he understands."

"Well——" he hesitated.

"You consent ? " she broke in, flushed and radiant with victory. "I knew you would, all the time. Now we must hurry home. I promised Dad to bring you back for lunch."

Michael thought of the impetuosity which had brought him from town so early ; but it was impossible to be cross with her in her childish eagerness.

CHAPTER XXI

MARLEY HOUSE is surrounded with a high wall. The edge of Hanger's Spinney runs out to meet it at a point some little distance from the main road, and it is here that a low postern door in the wall—well screened from observation—gives private access into the park. There is, moreover, a footpath traversing the spinney and leading direct to Marley Pryors. Michael suggested they should wait in an adjoining thicket situated on a knoll, with a good command of this path as well as of the postern door, and Esmée agreed to this without demur; having gained her point, she was content to surrender the leadership into Michael's hands.

It was growing dusk as they left the vicarage, but before they entered the wood a waning moon was shining fitfully through the haze that was drifting overhead. They had leisure enough to reach their objective before the appointed time; still, they threaded their way very carefully among the trees, and in silence, Michael leading the way along the grass-grown path, and Esmée stepping noiselessly behind him. The night was very still and breathless, not a leaf stirred in the undergrowth.

Suddenly she tugged at his arm, making him crouch behind a bush—and just in time too. For, from the further side of the footpath, there was a rustling which sounded quite close in the silent, frosty air, and then a dark shape moved into view about fifty yards away. A moment, and it was gone.

She gripped his arm, whispering :

“Don’t move. We can see the door in the wall quite well from here.”

How quick and resolute she was, he thought ; and the hand on his arm was as steady as a rock.

It had grown colder, and the air, which was very still, seemed to have thickened. Sure sign that there was fog about. The great clock in the market-place of Marley Priors could be heard striking five ; its tones were muffled by the distance, but were still quite audible.

A silence followed, but the heavy shadows of the trees hinted at concealment.

Then two shadowy forms appeared, only the dim outline of them visible. One of them must have lit a cigarette, for a glowing spark moved through the darkness, like a firefly, only more direct and level in its flight. But light and figures vanished with startling suddenness, and the darkness was as it had been before.

The moon had begun to rise above the trees ; now and then it gleamed redly through the thickening haze. The impassive stillness of the trees remained.

A sudden movement in the bushes ; a soft tapping sound followed by a click ; and then the outline of a figure loomed again out of the gloom, but nearer than before. A low murmur of voices arose, though the watchers were unable to catch a word of it. Suddenly another figure rose up and joined the first.

Esmée slipped her hand into Michael’s ; it was cold as ice, but it never trembled. He had been sceptical enough at the outset, but the girl’s suppressed excitement and the expectancy of the moment, both had communicated themselves to him. This thought was passing from the girl’s mind to his : which of the two figures, separated from them by so narrow a belt of darkness, was the murderer ? Michael could not fathom what their present intentions might

be, nor did he stop to try. He thought only of that one thing—to pierce the darkness and learn the truth at last ; and then to get his grip on the man whose hand had struck down old Jimmy.

The figures were moving through the trees now, making their way towards the wall which cast so deep a shadow. They were wading knee-deep in the undergrowth, and their faces were in shadow ; nothing discernible save these two dark outlines. The carpet of dead leaves dulled the sound of their footsteps.

They were further off now and nearing the door. Suddenly a sharp click broke the stillness. A small bright point of light stabbed through the opened door ; and from behind it a pale, peering face was sensed rather than seen. A moment—and all was dark as before.

It was only a glimpse he had caught of the face at the door, but the lightning impression left with him was that of Peters, though he could not have sworn to this in a court of law. It was the possibility of Peters' presence there that removed from his mind the more extravagant hopes that had entered it a moment before ; it brought him back to his original surmise of an organised pilfering from the house. There was that panelling coveted by the American, and there was the priceless old Marley carving. This, or something like it, must be the explanation, he concluded. Still, who could say ? The two might be inextricably interwoven.

But not so Esmée. Her fingers dug into his hand, and there was a catch in her breath as she whispered so low that he could hardly catch the words :

“ Now you see who's right ? There are three of them lying in wait for you. . . . Oh ! Mickey, laying the plot now to kill you ! ”

His smile was lost in the darkness.

"Sssh!" he whispered back, for her voice had risen at the end. "Keep very quiet and listen."

A moment passed, perhaps two; then the door in the wall closed softly.

"Have you got the key?"

"No," he said. "But you wait here while I make sure that they have all entered the park."

He was edging away to reconnoitre when he heard her following behind him.

"I'm coming with you. Quick, or we'll lose them altogether." Then swiftly, and grasping at his hand, she hurried him along in spite of the darkness, or the thorns that straggled through the thicket.

"We have got to chance them hearing us. But they won't. They must be well on the other side of the wall by now. . . . Oh, hurry." She breathed quickly from excitement.

Next moment they had reached the wall. The door was locked, as Michael had expected it to be. It was a high wall with an absolutely smooth surface; the problem was how to scale it. Michael hesitated.

"Oh, don't stop to argue." And anticipating the thought that was in his mind, she added: "Of course I am coming with you. Now how are you going to get me over the wall. I am not so tall as you." His figure looked very bulky to her in the dimness.

The moon, shining through a thinner veil of mist, was turning the darkness into a sort of ghostly radiance. Her eyes swept up to meet his, wide and fearless. He noted the resolution there, and hesitated no longer.

"All right. But there is danger in it."

"Of course."

"Then will you do as I tell you?"

And she nodded.

He knelt down at her feet.

“Now get on to my shoulder,” he commanded.

“Yes,” she said a little breathlessly, and stood reluctant.

“Quick”—and she obeyed. “Now hold my right hand, and steady yourself with your left hand on my neck. Are you ready?” he queried, when she had settled herself on his right shoulder as directed.

“Yes,” she breathed. Her soft arm was round his neck.

Then raising himself to his full height, he stood while she scrambled from him to the top of the wall and perched herself there, where his great strong arms held her for a moment.

“The ground is soft on the other side. Can you ‘drop’ it?” he asked, steadying his voice.

She whispered an affirmative.

“Then over you go before they can see you.”

A film of fog was rolling up again to meet the moon. The world grew very dark. There was the sound of a soft thud on the other side of the wall, then a small voice murmured:

“All right.”

Michael made a jump for the top. The coping was round and smooth, his hand slipped on it and he fell back. Again he essayed it, and this time he got his hands well across the top; then with a thrust upwards, which bruised his knees badly, he established a firm hold and pulled himself up. The next moment he was standing with her on the other side, and she was asking in her dear sympathetic way if he was hurt. And her voice was softer than anything he had ever heard.

Again the fog dispersed. For an instant the moon shone out clear, and they beheld the old wing of Marley frowning at them with all its nameless evil through skeleton trees, their boughs stripped of leaves in the last gale. As they

looked, a dark figure appeared and vanished again within the gloom of the great old yew hedge which flanked the shrubbery.

“Now we will have to run for it. This way——”

Catching her hand, he set off through a belt of trees which fringed the wall. The going was not easy, and the moon played hide-and-seek with the fog. Once she stumbled and must have fallen, had it not been for his arm.

On they went at a run, and for a considerable way.

“Tired?” he asked over his shoulder.

“Not a bit,” she panted, but he knew that she ached with fatigue.

There was no one to be seen now, and presently the mist settled down again, clinging to the trees in wreaths of a ghostly grey. Michael pulled up sharply as they entered the shrubbery, where they stood for a moment in pitch darkness, not seeing each other's face, and in a great stillness.

Esmée's heart was beating furiously, but there was a light in her eyes as she waited for the next move in the game, which she now left to the man beside her to make. Then she heard his voice whispering in the silence:

“Follow me.”

Nearing the ancient family vault, he turned round and murmured very softly: “Take care.” And she felt his hand guiding her round a grass-grown slab of stone which marked the resting-place of some long-forgotten favourite of the Marleys.

On they moved, noiselessly through the darkness, until they had come to the old vault itself. Working cautiously round it, Michael came to a halt under a giant yew at the corner, in close proximity to which a broad drive led to the eastern lodge of Marley which had its exit on the station road; a position, too, which commanded a view of the conservatory entrance. And there they waited.

I think it was about this time that Michael first awoke to the fact that the girl was occupying a good deal more of his thoughts than he had cared to admit even to himself. Time stood still while memories of the night rose up before him. Then his thoughts travelled further into the past with all the sweet companionship of her ; the wilful charm, and the indescribable wonder. As his mind passed on to the future, the stern, unyielding look returned to his face. But he had a confidence in his own strength which never left him for long and which helped him now in his belief that the situation would remain within his grasp. He was very young, after all, and his knowledge of a woman less than most men's.

A murmur of voices had arisen. Footsteps were approaching. Michael drew the girl further within the shelter of the yew ; then crouched by the edge of it, and in front of her, drawing his pistol at the same time and fingering it in readiness.

Closer drew the footsteps, and yet closer. A twig snapped close beside Michael. Next instant he was conscious of one dim shape, followed by another, and looming up within a few yards of him. His face grew grim and hard. He crouched, ready to spring. Another moment, and he would have launched himself upon the nearest figure.

Then a sudden hesitation seized upon him—that which he had never known of before when the time for action had come. It paralysed his power to move. Dimly, it was a fear for the safety of the precious person he held in his keeping ; that was the first thought which arrested him on the brink of action. Almost simultaneously his mind was detaching itself in another direction altogether, and he was debating with himself whether it would not be more effective to follow and see what the uninterrupted end of this adventure might be. There was the certitude, too, that one or more of the party must escape while he

secured the first one, unless he were prepared to shoot—and that was an obvious impossibility.

While these thoughts were surging through his brain, he waited, motionless, as one in a dream. Swiftly the three filed past, and he failed to catch a glimpse by which he might identify any of them, whose faces were enshadowed by the trees. Instantly the darkness closed in behind them; the sound of their footsteps grew less.

The girl had stolen up behind him. She caught his arm.

“What is the matter? Why did you let them go?” she asked, giving his arm a shake.

“Better to follow them,” he answered, rising to his feet.

“What is it? Are you a coward, Michael? Look at me! . . . Ah, I see, it was because of me. Because—I am a woman.” Tears of anger welled into her eyes. “Oh I *hate* you!” she exclaimed. “You have let them go! Risked Dick’s safety, perhaps, just because—I am a woman.”

With his eyes on the ground, he repeated dully: “No, it is not that. We can do better by following them. After all, Esmée”—and it was the first time he had called her that quite of his own accord—“they have done nothing to incriminate themselves, to our knowledge. It might have spoiled everything had I acted now. Come along, we must hurry after them.”

But she almost sobbed: “It is of no use now. I wish I had come alone. I could have held them up myself, instead of relying on any man. And I *did* trust you—up till now.”

She was following close behind him as she spoke, and for a long time after that she did not open her lips. Poor little woman, her heart was very full. He too kept silence.

Though they had vanished, yet there could be little doubt whither the precious trio were heading. Michael,

with Esmée a little behind, travelled swiftly along the drive through the mist.

Second thoughts were confirming him in his opinion that more would be accomplished by thus following than by effecting an immediate arrest, and possibly for no specific offence. But what was weighing on his mind was Esmée's sudden hatred of him, which he had taken mighty seriously, and in the strictest letter of the word. That; and then, too, it was adding to his anxiety to know that he had not yet succeeded in definitely distinguishing any of the three men.

Presumably Mongini was one of them, if the evidence of the letter which Esmée had pieced together could be regarded as a proof of it. Then he thought he had recognised the face of Peters at the door, though the glimpse obtained was so instantaneous and uncertain that he could not have sworn to it on oath. But it was the third man whose identity puzzled him, and the one whom he felt to be the most important of all.

And all the while they hurried on, Michael trying to pierce the darkness for a trace of those in front. To get to the lodge gate before them, by a short cut he knew of was the one chance now left to him. And then if there was no light as they passed through—then he might have to act. But would they be in time?

They had now traversed the greater part of the park, and were approaching the eastern lodge.

"This way," he whispered. "And better take my hand again. It is rough going."

After a slight hesitation, she caught hold of his hand, and they struck off on a side track which turned sharply through the trees of the park.

Reaching the wall again, they skirted along it for some little way. But the darkness was greater than ever here, and it was as much as Michael could do to steer a way

through it by groping with his free hand against the stone surface. Esmée dropped his hand without a word and took hold of his coat instead, giving him a greater freedom. Once, when he stumbled and fell, he nearly brought her down on top of him. But she had herself wonderfully in hand, for not a sound escaped her.

At last there rose above them the loom of something blacker than the darkness, which brought them to a standstill, breathing hard from the pace at which they had come. They had reached the lodge gates, but there was not a sign nor a sound of those of whom they were in pursuit. They had travelled quickly; part of the way they had run, cutting off a wide bend in the avenue by the side track. Were they too late? Or was there a mistake in his surmise as to their objective?

He paused to take breath, and listened. There was the girl's laboured breathing close behind him; save for this, there was no sound to break the unnatural stillness.

She had loosened her hold of him as soon as they halted. And now he crept forward without a word, edging his way slowly and with infinite caution, until he had reached the gate pillar. He felt the ironwork, working along it with his hands. The gate was ajar; at that his heart turned to stone. Then they were too late, after all, it seemed! How bitterly he regretted his letting them pass! . . .

But no, for a sound had caught his ear of which there could be no mistaking—it was the jingle of a horse's bit. Then, as he peered further forward in the direction of the sound, he became aware of the blurred outline of a trap without lights. 'Thank God!' he murmured as he turned and stole back to her.

"All right. We are in time," he whispered.

How long they waited he could not say. Suddenly a sound broke the silence. 'They' were coming.

A spectral shape appeared, followed by a second, then a third. The muttering of voices was audible. A glimmer of light shot up in the darkness ; flashed full on a man's face—a face which Michael had never seen before, but he saw it very distinctly now. There was a livid scar above the right eyebrow, the picture of which was indelibly stamped on Michael's memory. The man wore a scarf round his throat, was poorly clad, and carried a parcel under each arm.

This much Michael was able to see, when the light was extinguished as suddenly as it had appeared, and nothing more was left but the three dim forms which merged separately into the mist. He waited, but nothing further happened ; then he heard the sound of wheels, and knew that the cart had driven off. From the direction of its going, he concluded that it must be making for the station.

No time to be lost if they were to catch the train. So he said in a low voice : “Now for the station. And as fast as we can go.”

He explained the position to her. There was no danger to her on the main road ; he begged of her to return and let him go on alone. But she did not answer at once.

Then she put out a hand to him ; in the way she did it she was amazingly like a little girl who has got into mischief and come to ask forgiveness. She simply said :

“Michael, I'm sorry. I have been a little beast, and what is worse—a fool. But don't—don't try to get rid of me on that account. . . . I simply could not bear it.”

“You're a brave little soul, that's what you are.”

“And you,” she murmured, and her voice was soft as a caress, “you've been an absolute dear about it.”

So she was generous too with the generosity that admits a fault—the greatest generosity of all in a woman.

“And you will promise not to hold back when the time does come—just because I am a woman? You will think of me just as if I were another man? You will, Michael?”

And Michael promised.

CHAPTER XXII

THE train whistled through a cutting when they were yet a quarter of a mile from the station. It was only by running hard that they arrived in time to fling themselves into the last carriage, followed by an irate guard who banged the door to after them as the train steamed out of the station.

The fog was collecting rapidly as they neared London. It was going to be no easy matter to follow their man, Michael reflected, as the train slowed down, then proceeded at a snail's pace with the fog-signals detonating as they advanced. They discussed the situation, he weighing the pros and cons in his grave judicial manner and she alternating between hope and despair.

At length the train pulled up at a station where tickets were collected. Michael jumped out immediately and made his way along the platform, peering into each compartment as he passed.

There was a lady seated in the corner of a first-class compartment who was at some pains to display her resentment at his scrutiny, drawing herself up stiffly, and bridling, as it is commonly termed. Yet she was of uncertain age, and singularly devoid of looks.

Then, at last, fortune smiled. From a carriage a little way in front the very man he was looking for jumped out and began stamping about on the platform to warm himself. There was no mistaking him. He wore an old-fashioned ulster and gaiters, a brown bowler hat the

worse for wear, and the muffler noted before. Michael was at a loss to place the man or his vocation in life. There was a curious admixture of town and of country about him, as of one standing with a leg in either. Of the other two there was not a trace.

The tickets had all been collected. The guard was walking along, swinging the lantern in his hand. Doors were slamming.

"Train just going, sir," the guard growled as he passed ; and Michael slowly retraced his steps, keeping at the same time a close watch on the man in the muffler until he saw him enter his carriage. Then the whistle blew, and they were off again.

The difficulty, thought Michael, would be to keep their man in view once the great terminus was reached, and he gazed apprehensively out of the window. He recollected the large parcels, and concluded there would be some sort of a conveyance waiting at the other end.

"They must have been pilfering something from Marley house," the girl said, thereby echoing his unspoken thought.

"But never mind about that. We will mark him down, and set Mr. Kelly on to watch him."

Then as Michael debated with himself on the chances of obtaining a taxi in time, she again answered without his having expressed himself aloud.

"All right, Mickey. Mr. Mobbs is an old friend of mine. I wired early this morning and asked him to have a taxi waiting for us at the station. He is the head porter, you know, is my Mr. Mobbs."

"How did you guess—— ? "

"Oh, never mind. I just did." She looked up with her bright eager eyes ; expectant, too.

"Well done ! It *was* clever of you."

She flushed delightfully at the praise she had been looking for, but more at the warmth of it. She barely

concealed her gratification under a grown-up smile, and said :

“ Oh, it was nothing ! ”

The train, which had been creeping more slowly than ever, and with repeated stops, now came to its final rest. And sure enough, there was Mr. Mobbs waiting on the platform, his broad face opening out into a grin as he caught sight of Miss Favoril.

“ Evenin', miss,” he said, touching his cap with more than a pre-war courtesy and plainly pleased to see the little lady. “ Got your telegram. This way, miss.”

“ How very nice of you ! ” she exclaimed, thanking him with her eyes in the way that would send a man gladly to his death to serve her. “ You know, Mobbs, it is dreadfully important. The fact is, we—are following someone.”

“ *Indeed*, miss ! ”

“ Yes, Mobbs—a matter of life and death. But I can't stop to talk to you now. Some other time . . . ”

“ Very good, miss. And I would just like to say as how Mobbs is very willing to serve you, any time at all, miss.”

“ And how is Mrs. Mobbs and the little girl ? ” Her kindly way of asking had about it the merit of sincerity.

These were the scraps of conversation which reached Michael as he followed in her wake, keeping a sharp look-out on the man in the muffler who was making his way in a line parallel to their own and a little in front.

“ This is the taxi, miss,” said Mobbs, coming to a halt and opening the cab door with a flourish.

There was an arc lamp just overhead, spreading its ghostly flare into the fog. The taxi man touched his cap as the girl approached. But when she smiled at him and nodded, he cast aside the rug within which he had coiled himself, and jumped from his seat to assist her. What

an invaluable travelling companion she was, thought Michael; hers was the magic that opened doors—of the human heart, as of taxi-cabs. It was some power of magnetism she had.

Mobbs presented the man thus: "Jem Crabbie, a pal o' mine. He'll see you through. . . . Mind you, Jem, it's verry important. You'll do just as this lady orders you. Thank you, sir," he murmured, accepting with obvious reluctance the sovereign which Michael had slipped into his hand.

Crabbie nodded. "Where to, miss?" he asked, addressing himself to Miss Favoril, who was now seated in the taxi.

The man in the muffler was standing not far off, lifting the last of his parcels into a van which was drawn up alongside the kerb. Michael touched the chauffeur's arm.

"There, you see that van into which the man is stepping? Well, we want you to keep close behind without letting him suspect we are following him. On no account lose sight of him."

As the man was now whipping up his horse, Michael jumped into the taxi and closed the door. Off they set into the fog, the last thing Michael was conscious of being the open-mouthed amazement on Mobbs' honest face.

Fog filled the city, the lamps looking pale wraiths of themselves. The taxi threaded its way through mysterious streets pervaded by that curious sense of solitude and unreality which a fog always brings. Michael peered out of the windows, trying to distinguish their line of direction; but soon he gave it up, as completely in a haze as the night itself, though the taxi was moving very slowly indeed.

Now there is nothing which exhilarates Miss Esmée so much as a soupçon of risk; and there is little doubt but that she regarded the present adventure as bounded by

something far more substantial than that—by positive danger, in fact.

“What fun!” she said; and “Oh! isn’t it nice!” with a little ripple of excitement in her voice, and snuggling her warm coat more closely about her.

“Yes,” said Michael, with a lack of enthusiasm.

His heart was in his mouth as the taxi skidded badly round a corner, and nearly collided with a bus, throwing the girl violently against his shoulder.

“I don’t believe you are enjoying it a bit, Michael.”

“I don’t dislike it,” he assured her, steadying himself after their recent escape from the bus.

“What! We’re tracking a murderer through a fog, and that is all you feel about it. I wonder if anything could ever thrill you—or are you merely one of these tiresome people who won’t enthuse? Besides, that is old-fashioned now. My dear Michael, you must get out of it.”

But here the taxi pulled up with a grinding suddenness. Michael leaped out, and in a moment Esmée was by his side.

“Where?” he queried with a business-like brevity.

“In there, sir,” and Crabbie pointed to a gaping blackness in the wall. “The man went in there.”

“But where is the van?”

“It drove on.”

Michael looked about him to fix, if possible, his bearings in the fog. They were standing in a very narrow street that was little better than a lane, and a very grimy one at that. There was a corner lamp some two hundred yards off, in the direction from which they had come with darkness intervening; and there was this blank wall with a gap in it. That was all—not the vestige of another light to define the shape of the building.

What was to be done? They had butted up against a brick wall in more senses than one; and when he thought

of Esmée—despite his promise to her—he had to confess to himself that he did not like the look of things at all.

“Do you know where we are?” he inquired of Crabbie.

“Well, I couldn’t rightly say if this ’ere lane has got a nime or not, sir. But it turns off Leather Street, which runs into Rupert Street some little ways back.”

“Oh, hurry! We’ll lose him altogether if you two men stand here talking like—like a Greek chorus”—an expression no doubt borrowed from the vicar.

But Michael’s face was set in its sternest mould as he turned to the girl and said a little curtly:

“We have run the fellow to earth, but I don’t think we will discover much more to-night.”

Her eyes narrowed on him as he spoke. “And you mean to leave it at that?” she asked.

“No, I mean to see Kelly and to go thoroughly into the matter with him by daylight.”

“But now? What are you going to do now?”

“I am going to see where that passage leads to, that’s all.”

“Better leave it alone, sir,” advised Crabbie. “Them back lanes in Little Italy are none too healthy on a night like this.”

‘Italy!’ It was a rallying cry to Esmée—though I doubt very much if she needed one.

“We must go on!” she cried.

Michael turned round on her. He said, speaking very quietly: “You will wait here with Crabbie.”

“No.”

He looked immensely tall in the fog as he stood over her. I don’t know how it was, but he forgot the sway she held over him—forgot, in fact, that she was a woman. He laid a hand on each shoulder of her, and none too lightly.

“Listen to me,” he said, giving her a shake. “You *shall* remain here.” And he stared into her eyes. It

was Michael in command of his battalion, issuing his short, crisp commands ; not with haste, yet with the quick directness of the man who is self-reliant in action.

She did not speak for a minute. All at once her proud little head drooped ; then she faltered in a low voice :

“Very well. But don’t you go, Mickey. Please wait till the morning.”

He was moving away, and did not answer. She made as though to follow him, then stopped as if some force outside herself was holding her back.

“You will be careful. . . . Oh, Mickey,” she breathed, “you will. . . .”

“Of course. And he entered the passage, carefully feeling his way along it.

The passage was very narrow ; he brushed both sides of it with his arms. His footsteps sounded muffled, yet echoed strangely as he was swallowed up in a swirl of fog. The world of reality receded far from him.

He had carried the torchlight with him, but did not choose to use it, groping his way in the darkness until he should have come to the end of the passage. It came with a startling suddenness, the stick which he held in front of him as a sort of feeler recoiling upon him as the point of it struck on a hollow-sounding surface which he found to be a door.

In darkness, as before, he fumbled with the handle ; turned it very slowly, very silently, and pressed. But there was not a sign of yielding. He placed his shoulder against it and thrust with all his weight, but it never budged an inch. Then he flashed the torchlight swiftly, and a feeble little flare it made in the encircling fog, which showed him nothing but the door and what was apparently the back entrance of a tall building, the windows of which were in total darkness. That was all there was to it.

There was nothing further to be done. He turned to

retrace his steps. Suddenly he stopped to listen, every nerve in his body intent. But all was silent as the grave.

"Nothing," he announced gravely as he rejoined Esmée. "Only a locked door. We can do nothing more to-night."

"I am so glad." She said it with a curious little catch in her voice.

He looked at her, perplexed. What a bewildering piece of humanity a woman was! And Esmée, in particular, who always kept him guessing: 'What next?'

"Come along; we'll have some dinner and talk it over."

As he spoke he was opening the door of the taxi, into which she crept without a word, as quiet as a little mouse. He made a careful note of the gap in the wall, fixing it with reference to its distance from the only lamp-post in the lane. Then he turned to the chauffeur:

"The fog has thickened infernally—can you manage to drive us to the Lotus?"—mentioning a quiet little restaurant in the most respectable part of Soho.

Crabbie thought he could.

"Well, go slow and be extra careful, won't you?"

Crabbie smiled, "Yes, sir," and Michael's heart went out to him for the assurance of his smile.

Compared with that of the early part of the evening, the fog which now rolled through the city was of a Stygian density. How Crabbie found his way through the swirling wreaths of it was a mystery to Michael; it seemed to be a question of instinct rather than geography.

Esmée, subdued, sat half-turned from him, in a sort of pathetic quietude.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE taxicab certainly did go slowly. It crawled. Michael looked at his watch and said: "No wonder."

"What?" she asked listlessly. She had become a little tired child for the moment.

"It is a quarter past nine. No wonder I'm famished."

"You would be," she flashed back at him, hinting at the appetite which Michael calls perfectly normal, and his friends term gluttony. But his face softened under cover of the darkness; he had accomplished his ends, having diverted her attention.

"Laughing at me once more? . . . I'm glad."

"Of course. I'm always laughing at you. But why are you glad?"

"Well," said he, "I was fearing I had been rather severe with you."

"You, Michael? When?"

"When I ordered you to remain behind with Crabbie."

"And you thought you had subdued me?"

"No, but I was thinking of your eyes. There was a sort of frightened look in them—at least, I thought so."

"Oh, Michael!" she said in an amused little voice. "So you think you can read a woman's eyes, do you? Well, you're learning." Then with a smile of bewitching sweetness, she added: "You are one of the men who always get what they want, aren't you?"

He was conscious of some undercurrent of meaning in

her words. This time it was not raillery, and it puzzled him. He took his time to consider it, then asked :

“Why ? ”

“I can't say exactly—something rather inevitable about you, I suppose . . . when you really want a thing.”

It was pleasant entering the brilliantly lit Lotus restaurant after the cold and the fog outside. The girl had cast aside her depression, and was radiant as ever he had seen her. There was a pleased little milse lurking about the corners of her lips which no man could fathom. As they halted at the door of the grill, he said :

“I must get Kelly on the 'phone. He lives not far from here, and may be able to come round before we finish dinner. After that I shall pack you off to your aunt's.”

“Don't you worry about that. She is not expecting me before eleven. If I am going to be later than that, I can telephone. I am going to wait and talk to Mr. Kelly too, and you shan't subdue me this time. Just you try it again. . . . Now run along, and ring up Mr. Kelly. I'll get a table for two and order dinner.”

She whisked round, surveying the crowded room with a critical air and sniffing at the rather dense fumes of smoke. It was the first time she had been in a Soho restaurant, and she was absorbing the entire situation at a glance. Michael, who had not progressed far, had stopped to see what she would do, an amused look in his eyes at the perfect assurance and detachment of her. And this is what he saw.

The head waiter had not appeared at once, so she stalked one whom she plainly took to be the manager.

“Can you please show me to a table for two ? ” she said, accosting a certain faultlessly-dressed barrister Michael knew by sight, with haughtiness and yet with an engaging smile. Such an admixture may seem improbable ; but not if you knew Miss Favoril.

The barrister looked startled. He screwed an eyeglass into his eye for support and regarded the girl in some astonishment. Next moment he was smiling back at her ; and the eyeglass, having dropped from its proud place was tinkling against a waistcoat button.

"That," said he, "is just what I am trying to find myself. I will send the waiter to you as soon as I am able to find him."

He bowed and passed on—a humorist and a gentleman.

When Michael returned, it was to find her duly installed at a table for two. She was leaning back with a satisfied air, having just registered her order with the waiter. Also she was smoking—why, he could not think, for he knew she hated cigarettes. Possibly she thought in Bohemia it was up to her to be Bohemian ; but it only had the effect of making her small round face look more radiantly childish than ever, also it was making her eyes water. A slow, tender little smile overspread his face.

"Esmée," he said, occupying the vacant seat opposite to her, "there is no use trying. You will never grow up."

She puffed hard at her cigarette, striving to look as if she enjoyed it. "Don't be absurd !" she retorted. Then, leaning across the table, her eyes sparkling upon him, she said : "Oh, isn't this nice, Mickey ? I *am* glad we ended it up here, and aren't you glad I brought you ? "

Michael recaptured his frown, but only with an effort. "That's all very well," said he. "But who was that strange man you were accosting ? "

"I don't know. Why ? "

"I merely ask because just at present I am responsible for you——"

"It was his own fault. He was so nicely dressed I was sure he must be the manager."

"Well, he wasn't. He happens to be rather a famous barrister."

"You watched me?"

He nodded.

"Oh, Mickey, you are a beast! Why didn't you tell me?" She laughed.

"Because you were so perfectly sure of yourself, and because you gave me no opportunity to interfere. Well, what happened when you discovered your mistake?"

"Oh, I smiled at him. It was the only thing to do."

"And what did he do then?"

"Smiled. . . . I can't think what you are laughing at," she said, herself breaking into ripples of laughter.

It was a good dinner. The girl talked gaily of the great arrest to be effected on the morrow; she talked incessantly, and he was very happy listening to her. Passing on, she had reached the point where Dick was to leave the court without a stain upon his character, when Michael noticed Kelly threading his way across the crowded room towards them.

Kelly arrived, his rosy face rosier than ever from the cold, and his cheeks glistening. He joined them over coffee and liqueurs while Michael explained to him all that had transpired. He could not tell the name of the lane, but described as nearly as possible the point at which it took off from Leather Street.

"Did you notice a grimy little picture-house at the corner?"

"Yes, there was a picture-house," Michael replied.

"Did this particular one have a very narrow appearance, and a peaky sort of roof, as though the adjoining buildings had squeezed it up, and into the air?"

"Yes, that's right," Esmée chimed in brightly.

Kelly's round, bird-like eyes lighted up as he noticed the girl's enthusiasm. "Well, that settles it," said he, disposing of a brandy liqueur at one gulp and nodding his head approvingly. "I know the place now. . . .

Now tell me, Mr. Frayne : you passed into it from Leather Street ? Was it to your left you turned when you entered the passage ? ”

“ Yes. ”

“ Then the back of the house you butted up against is in a block of buildings facing on Bright Street. Not a healthy resort on a dark night—— ”

“ There now, what did I tell you, Michael ? ” And Esmée shook her head at him sagely.

“ And the young lady with you, too ! ”

But ‘ the young lady ’ kept quite silent about *that*.

“ There has been many a happening in that quarter, though of course it is nothing like so bad as it was in the old days when first I knew Soho. . . . About how far up the lane would you say the passage is ? One hundred yards, or two ? ”

“ Nearer two hundred than one hundred, I should say. ”

Michael saw there was a definite purpose in each of Kelly’s questions, and for some unaccountable reason an uneasy feeling fastened on him, as though they were approaching some inevitable anti-climax as a result of all their searching. He glanced across at Esmée ; the same thought seemed to be transmitting itself to her, for he noted that the light had gone out of her face.

Kelly removed the ash from his cigar with excessive care, then he said : “ Well, I haven’t had occasion to visit Bright Street for donkeys’ years ; but I’ll renew my acquaintance with it in the morning. By the way, can you tell me at all what the man in the muffler looked like ? ”

This Michael did to the best of his ability, dwelling on the details of his dress. “ A curious assortment of town and country, it seemed to me, ” he concluded.

“ Yes, ” said Kelly eagerly, “ yes. And tell me now, was there no distinguishing mark on his face ? ”

"There was."

"A scar above the right eye?"

"Yes."

"That settles, it, then. It is Muldoon you've been following—just as I was after thinking myself the whole time."

There was no getting away from the finality of Kelly's utterance.

"A countryman of yours, Kelly. There is not much of Italy in the name."

Kelly chuckled. "Just that, and a pretty big blackguard in a small way, too. He is known as the poachers' friend. Collector and carrier combined, and the picker-up of any odd trifles that don't belong to him. Nothing big about Muldoon. He lives in the Italian quarter, and is as cunning as the old 'un himself. There isn't the 'beak' born who is able to convict him."

So her Italian-looking man was Irish after all! A poacher, not a murderer. Michael looked swiftly at Esmée, then away. Her face had paled, but she was struggling gamely with a smile, while the structure she had toiled to build was tumbling like a pack of cards about her feet.

Kelly, too, knew where the trouble lay; there was a lot of unobtrusive sympathy in his face as he broke in, speaking softly:

"Never you be minding, miss. After all there may be more in this than meets the eye. And it is the unconsidered trifle—the straw blown along by the wind of chance—which, often as not, leads to detection of a crime. That's so, isn't it, Mr. Frayne?"

And Michael agreed, cheerfully as he could. Little did he think then of the issues that were to hang on this very thing.

"I'll be looking round in the morning, and then we'll

see what can be done. Meantime we'll never say die. But I must be off now."

Michael eyed him through the haze of smoke. "Fix a time and I'll be there," he said.

Esmée's mouth grew mutinous. "We'll be there," she amended with the dignity of a dowager.

Kelly grinned and shook his head. "Kelly will be there, and no other. Else I'll never be finding out what's what. There will be those in Bright Street who may be opening out to Kelly a bit ; they'd be closing up tight as an oyster if there was anyone else with him. Sure thing," he affirmed. "Good-night, and keep smiling—that's the motto." So smiling cheerily to them, he turned and left.

Esmée's face was like a child's who has broken her first doll. "Oh, Mickey," she faltered, "it is too dreadful. To think—after all our hopes—that it should end like this ! "

He did what he could to comfort her, but she seemed to be paying little heed to his words. She wanted to cry, but her sense of humour would not let her. All at once she brightened up, taking it upon herself to encourage a comrade rather than to show her own despair.

"Never mind, we'll see it through yet," she said.

She was a wonderfully helpful sort of person, smiling through her own disappointment, and despite fatigue. But as she smiled, she turned away so that he should not see the quivering of her mouth.

Yet somehow Michael understood. There had been small room for sentiment of any sort in his life hitherto ; but he was a man naturally possessed of a quick sympathy, and his companionship with Esmée was bringing out all the human understanding that was in him.

Her service in France had taught her to laugh and to endure—and she was yet a child. A heritage of age before youth had gone ; he too knew what that meant. It was

thus she endeared herself to him ; and what an exquisite comradeship it fostered ! And then—then he thought of Dick, and a chill crept into his heart.

He was very thoughtful of her, and tender, in his quiet way ; unobtrusive sympathy and the small attentions that do not escape a woman's notice. But he had grown graver, too, with a restraint in his manner he strove to conceal.

The fog was as thick as ever ; it invaded the taxi, hiding the mist of tenderness that had come into her eyes as she turned towards him.

"You need not tell me you are not frowning," she said ; "I can feel it. . . . *Don't*, Michael ! For I know we'll win through yet—you and I."

As he left her at her aunt's door she held his hand for a moment, giving it a tiny squeeze.

"You *are* a dear !" a small voice whispered.

And she was gone.

CHAPTER XXIV

AT about three o'clock the following afternoon Kelly telephoned. It was a Saturday, and Michael had returned to his chambers.

"Busy?"

"No," replied Michael. "Who is speaking, please?"

"Coming along then—it's Kelly."

Kelly was laconic over the telephone, if ever a man was. When Michael asked what was the news, there was no answer, and he was obliged to await Kelly's arrival before learning more. As he waited he was thinking of Esmée and her disappointment of the night before, desperately hoping that there might yet be something of comfort to communicate to her as a result of Kelly's investigation.

Presently the little man came bustling in; settled himself in a chair by the fire; filled his pipe, and lit it. Then in answer to Michael's question if he had discovered anything of importance from his inquiries of the morning:

"I have—and I haven't," he answered. "You remember we had tracked the di Conti representative to London, where the trail petered out?"

"Yes."

"Well, I heard of her this morning. Saw her, in fact—in Bright Street."

Michael exclaimed: "Her!"

"Yes. A girl barely out of her 'teens, and as sweet an expression as ever a madonna wore in a picture."

He puffed at his pipe, casting a sidelong glance down

the bowl to see how it burned, while Michael watched with a growing impatience.

“Get on with it, man. It seems as if our last hope has gone, but I want to hear the whole of it—when you have quite finished with that pipe of yours.”

Kelly regarded him from the corner of his eye and answered soothingly: “All right, Mr. Frayne, I’ll begin at the beginning, though there isn’t much of a beginning, and faith! there’s less of an end. The facts are these: I was renewing my acquaintance with Little Italy on my way to the Muldoons’, looking about me as I walked, when what should my eye fall upon but a notice in an upper-storey window, ‘H. di Conti. Needlework and Embroidery.’ Well, thought I to myself, that’s strange now. So I went in to have a word with the old ice-creamier who lets out the apartments above. It is not the first encounter we’ve had, that same old Neapolitan vendor and myself; once he was dragged into a nasty little affair out of which I had helped to extricate him. So he owed me one on that—but that is another story which is neither here nor there.”

Here Kelly broke off to knock the ashes out of his pipe before continuing:

“I spoke to him first about Muldoon and his doings, and he was perfectly easy in his answers, though his little beady eyes kept watching me all the while and wondering what the devil I was getting at with such small fry as the poacher’s friend. Then I turned the conversation. ‘That’s a new lodger you’ve got upstairs,’ I began, and that was enough to set him going—the old scoundrel, he has all the garrulity of his years. The last of an old race, he informed me, and if all people came by their dues she would be the owner of millions instead of eating out her life in poverty. And so on I let him talk.

“It seems that his father and his forefathers before

that had served the di Contis from time immemorial. How the latter fell from their high estate, and how they slowly died out until the war accounted for the last male members of the line, will not interest you any more than it did me. But I learned enough to know without a doubt that this slip of a girl is the very di Conti whom we have been looking for——”

Here Michael cut in irritably: “But it can’t be. How do you make that out?”

“Simply because she is the last of the family. We’ve come on her by a strange chance. Straws in the wind; with all our reasoning and logic, that’s how we are driven to it in the end. Just as I was saying to the young lady last night. . . . She’ll be glad to know where it has driven me to-day.” And he chuckled to himself.

But Michael, who was growing angered at the little man’s plain satisfaction in himself, retorted sharply: “I don’t think she will. It has brought us to another dead-end, that’s all.”

“Dead-end! Not a bit of it—at least not necessarily so. Of course you can call it what you please,” he added huffily, then subsided into a silence, puffing at his pipe and studying the wreaths of smoke as they curled upwards.

Michael’s face grew grimmer with the frown that settled there. One dead-end after another, that was all he could see to it. First the tracking which ended in Muldoon, the poacher, and which, in turn led to the discovery of an innocent girl—the last of her race. So that avenue, too, was closed, and there seemed to be nothing for it but to begin all over again, with the solution of the mystery farther off than ever. Meantime the day of Dick’s trial was drawing nearer. And in face of this, he was fronted with the insufferable complacency of Kelly, who sat in the chair opposite, smoking and perfectly serene. So he took no time for his customary deliberation before he said bluntly:

"I am sorry, Kelly, but really I cannot see that there is anything to be pleased about."

Kelly sat up in his chair at that. Then he answered stiffly: "For one thing, Mr. Frayne, we have eliminated certain factors. Now we can put out of the reckoning your Monginis, and Peters, and Muldoons. Not one of that precious trio has been concerned in the murder. Not one of them has got the 'guts'—or the motive. If they had, you may be sure Muldoon would never have dared to involve himself in any petty pilfering or poaching, as the case may be—which is all there is to that. Next, we can eliminate the di Conti herself. I tell you I have seen her with my own eyes, and there is more of the convent about her than the prison cell. I'll stake my knowledge of psychology on that."

"Maybe—then what remains?"

"One thing," replied Kelly, just as curtly. "The person, or persons, who may have acted on her behalf without her knowledge of it."

Scepticism was plainly visible on the other's face, but Kelly went on doggedly:

"I am not claiming that this is a natural corollary, Mr. Frayne. But it is a possibility, and sound enough at that. We are left, besides, with nothing else to work upon—that is why I am concentrating on it now. That is all, I think," he added, with the incisiveness of a man put on his mettle. "And if you'll excuse me now, I'll be getting busy." He rose.

The strain of the past few weeks and the anxiety for the future must have told on Michael until he reached a pitch of exasperation outside his usual self. Besides, he was beginning to think Kelly an ass, and such he did not suffer gladly.

"It seems to me that the old Italian has succeeded in

hoodwinking you," he said, after regarding Kelly for a bit and in silence.

A dull red spread itself under the rubicund countenance of Kelly. "No, I'll take my oath on that."

But Michael pursued his course to its end, in the deliberate, inevitable fashion of the man. He concluded:

"Either that, or else you've jumped to a hasty conclusion in the matter of Muldoon and the others."

"Him!" Kelly's voice rose. "It's poaching he was after. Nothing more. I could have told you that much last night—only I didn't want to let you down, and the young lady there, too. Maybe a stick of furniture he'd be taking, here and there. But he has no more to do with the murder than the sole of my foot—I know his kind."

The little man's eyes flashed furiously, his cheeks puffed out with indignation.

"Do you wish me to carry on, Mr. Frayne?" he demanded.

"Of course."

"Then, if you'll excuse me saying it, I shall go about it in my own way in future—without any amateurs interfering. That, or not at all. The next report I shall make to you, Mr. Frayne, will be either complete success—or failure." And with that he stalked from the room.

So Michael was left alone with his own ill-humour. A recollection of M'Kerrel's warning with regard to Kelly's disposition increased his self-dissatisfaction. He was beginning to see that it was he who had been hasty in his conclusions—not Kelly; and that angered him, for he was very honest with himself. He had gained nothing by it, either, and now he had Esmée herself to face with the truth of it.

He had promised to inform her at once of the results of Kelly's inquiries, and he telephoned to her, making as light of his own disappointment as he could. At the same

time, he made an appointment to meet her before her departure from town later in the week. The following day he was to visit Dick in prison, and after that he intended to have a look round the old house on his way back, though of this he made no mention to her at the time.

CHAPTER XXV

I SHOULD like to be a fly on the wall and watch M'Kerrel's face as he reads this : to see the humorous, twisted smile of the man, and to listen to his dry chuckle : "Mon, but yon was an awfu' like fule that he made o' himsel'." I can hear him say it, lapsing into his broadest Doric as he pondered on such unexpected action on the part of Michael, for whom the old fellow had a genuine liking.

It was the next morning that Michael, encountering M'Kerrel in the Strand, turned and walked along with his friend in a direction which presently led up a quiet side-street. I fancy what Michael had been going through was changing him for the moment into a man of impulses, rather than one of grave deliberation, for he plunged at once into the thought that was uppermost in his mind.

"Nothing but dead-ends, that's all we have come upon, Mac," he broke out despondently.

M'Kerrel's shrewd old face softened. He slipped a kindly hand through the arm of his young friend. "If it's crime you're alluding to," he said, "we'll discuss it generally, if you don't mind. And speaking generally, Michael, I should say there are no such things as dead-ends in crime or in anything else. For you will find an opening somewhere even if you have to tunnel for it. And so you pass from one seeming dead-end to another less dead, and travel until you arrive at something living—be it for good or for evil."

His eyes took on their dreamy look as he continued :

“Life itself comes to a seeming dead-end. But who can tell? There may be another beyond, and something beyond that again until we reach the living truth—somewhere in infinity.”

Whatever the man's beliefs, they were certainly too vast for mere religion.

“But it was crime we were talking of,” he went on quickly and with his dry smile, “not eternity ; and God forbid that they should synchronise. There is a class of crime in the detection of which inferences and deductions play a leading part. Your habitual criminal can never dissociate himself entirely from his methods ; and it is a study of his idiosyncrasies that leads to detection in the end. He is comparatively easy to deal with, for you are working backwards as well as forwards, and the two ends must meet some time. But with a murderer who is a casual criminal, it is all new ground you are breaking ; he does not repeat his performances as a rule. Ordinarily speaking, murder is not a systematised crime, and that is what I mean by saying that inferences and deductions play a less important part in complex murders than the simple process of elimination—and often of mere luck in stumbling on the truth. . . .

“But there, you take my advice, and trust yourself in Kelly's hands. He understands all that as well as most. I know his methods ; he is sound and a stickler. He will narrow down the field of inquiry by this same process of elimination ; and then he will sit down and concentrate on the few possibilities remaining, even though that means merely watching straws. He has got more imagination than either you or I possess. Only, as I told you before, don't get on the wrong side of him if you want to keep in his confidence.”

Michael said nothing to this, but kept his own counsel.

smarting under a fresh sense of his own indiscretion in the matter of Kelly.

"Even if he falls short of success in time for the trial you must not despair. I take it the defence will counter by suggestions of as probable an alternative solution as may be. I am only speaking generally; when the trial is over we can discuss details more intimately than is possible now. Meantime, friend Michael," he added, gripping his arm, "do not lose heart."

Only a week remained before Dick had to stand his trial on the charge of murder.

As Michael entered the cell, Dick searched his face with a swift, almost furtive glance; and reading the answer which he had read each time before, he turned away and sat crouched up, his head clasped in both hands.

"There is no blinking the fact," he muttered. "The circumstantial evidence is strong enough to hang a man. I am not a coward; but it is a death—not easy to face, Michael. And I am innocent. . . . Oh, damn them!" he cried, clenching and unclenching his hands.

Brave he was to the pitch of a quixotic recklessness, as Michael well knew; of an impulsive chivalry, facing death with a laugh on the spur of the moment; but he was prostrate now with the strain of waiting, until the very fibres of his nature seemed to have weakened.

"Ever since I heard the key turn in the door I have been on the rack, and now I am in a state of semi-sanity." He spoke staring fixedly in front of him. Suddenly he bowed his head, abandoning himself to unutterable despair.

He told again of sleepless nights, and of nights in which he would awaken in a cold sweat of terror. But worst of all were the moments of sudden waking at dawn, the imagined touch of a hand on his shoulders summoning him to a shameful end. In presence of others, the fine

pride of the man would have kept him up ; but to Michael, in whom it was his custom to confide, in a manner which is rare among men, he unmasked himself, telling of the agonised hours of solitude when the day wore on with its disordered fancies, and its confused memories of other days. One day followed by another, and yet another, in a ghastly sequence. And the awful silence and the sunlessness of it all.

“I’d welcome a death in the open. But—O God, not this ! ” he breathed. “Can you do nothing ? You have helped me out before—can you do nothing now ? ”

And Michael, in a voice of incredible softness, answered : “We are doing all we can. It is bound to come right, old fellow ; never you fear.”

Dick calmed down, but it was with the dulness of despair and of apathy. Michael talked to him of Esmée, who had paid what visits she could to the prison ; but to-day there was no rousing him, he seemed scarce to listen.

It was his last act of all which burned itself on Michael’s memory ; there was something so pitiable about it.

A beam of wintry sunshine had struggled into the cell. Dick rose at once and made his way towards it, moving until the beam smote full upon his face. There was a far-away look in his eyes, which had lost consciousness of his friend’s presence. He stood perfectly motionless while the sunshine lasted.

“It is good to feel it there again,” he said, whispering to himself.

Then the light faded out and died.

After leaving Dick, Michael motored over to Marley Pryors, and then straight on to the old house. His intention was to have a rapid look over it, to see if it remained untouched after the recent happenings there ; and with this object in view he had obtained the keys from the

local agents with whom they had been lodged. The last caretaker—and a burly man at that—had left one morning in a hurry, without any notice and with a scared look on his face, if all accounts were to be credited ; and his going had added immensely to the local ill-repute into which the old house had fallen.

The grey morning had grown into a greyer afternoon, and very still. Not a breath of air stirred, and the clouds hung low. Seen from without, Marley House presented no prepossessing appearance in that sombre winter's afternoon, but lay, brooding over some old, long meditated evil.

As Michael got down from his car at the entrance, the old porch seemed to greet him with a sort of waiting menace. He closed the door softly behind him, and immediately was conscious of a curious sense of chill.

"What nonsense !" he muttered under his breath, "Getting fanciful, that's what you are. There is the same sort of eeriness in every empty house."

But as he made his round of inspection, then mounted the stair leading to the old wing, the sinister spirit of the place kept pace with him, step by step, until he found himself tip-toeing along, watchful even of his own shadow. For an instant he hesitated opposite the door that would usher him into the old hall—the 'Room of Death.' And—he had to confess it—his heart beat more rapidly. He turned the handle swiftly, and crossed the threshold.

He closed the door behind him again very softly. Almost noiselessly, he slipped across the hall and into the alcove. As he stood there, examining the valuable fixtures and satisfying himself that none of them had been tampered with, he whipped round once or twice and peered behind him expectantly—the sort of feeling that pulls one up instinctively to listen, and to long for human companionship. But not a sound broke the ghastly stillness.

Try as he might, he could not shake off the vague feeling of obsession which was gradually overtaking him. It began to irritate him, for there was no accounting for it to his logic save in the association of ideas, and he had prided himself on the possession of a mind impervious to that.

He could find nothing whatsoever to confirm his suspicions of any attempt at robbery, so after another hurried glance round he made his way down the steps and out by the conservatory door, the key of which was also with him. A slanting shaft of sunlight met him as he emerged and stood in the shrubbery, looking about him curiously to see if the three night-prowlers had left any traces behind them. But there was nothing to be made out of the hard gravelled pathway, showing signs already of neglect, as if infected like the house itself with death and corruption.

He was on the point of retracing his steps to the front to re-enter his motor and drive off, when a small object under the yew hedge caught his eye. He picked it up and started as he found, on a closer inspection, that it was a cigarette of that peculiar brand which Dick had smoked, and which he had found in much the same place on the morning following the murder.

Yes, there was no doubt about that. It was only half smoked, as had been the case with the previous one ; only this time it was brown and sodden with moisture, though the name was still distinguishable. How long it had lain there it was impossible to say, as it had remained well within the protection of the dense hedge, close to the roots of it. One thing was certain, that there were others besides Dick who smoked this unusual brand of cigarette in the neighbourhood. The solution that most readily suggested itself was that of Peters helping himself from Dick's stock. On the other hand, Kelly was convinced that neither Peters nor his confederates were in any way implicated in the murder.

Gaining the open road, he let the car out ; and as he flashed past the vicarage on his way back to London, his thoughts turned to Esmée. In spite of her extravagant way of arriving at a conclusion, there was a self-reliance with which her war-work had endowed her. And yet there was all of a woman's sweetness, and youth itself left. '*Si jeunesse savait*' was an established fact amongst many of the golden youth of the after-war—the youth which knows and yet which can.

Yes, he would tell her just everything that had occurred, and they would work together for Dick's freedom. Kelly could go his own way.

CHAPTER XXVI

ESMÉE sided with Michael entirely; she is a staunch little soul, of a splendid enthusiasm for her friends and a lasting loyalty towards them in all their ways. He had explained the *contretemps* with Kelly, and how ruffled the small man had been in consequence.

"You were perfectly right, Michael," she exclaimed.

But this Michael refuted. He had too great a self-detachment not to detect when he was in the wrong, and too much honesty to let her think otherwise.

"No," said he, "it was I who was the ass—not Kelly."

But she would not have it. She could say what she liked of him—but only *to* him. And no other person should be allowed to criticise Michael adversely—not even Michael himself.

"No, Michael, you were right," she repeated. "I never did think much of him. Now we will work on our own, you and I. We will go round at once and see this di Conti person. A regular vampire type of woman, I know. But a man is such a stupid where a woman is concerned, and so easily taken in. Oh, I see it all now! . . . We must discover whom it is she has egged on to do the murder for her—that is, if we are sure she did not do it herself," she added darkly and with enthusiasm.

But there was a pale, wan look about her face. It was only her spirit that kept her up as the day of the trial loomed nearer.

“ Yes, but—— ”

“ I insist, Michael. I really do. I will say I have come to see her about some needlework. You leave it all to me.”

Forcible she was for so small a woman, and Michael smiled at the unbounded confidence in herself, as also at her woman's disregard of the laws of consistency. He pointed out that her conclusions, in the main, were very much those for which she had just condemned Kelly. But he knew it was not a bit of good, even as he spoke. And it wasn't.

“ Of course, if you ask me to—— ”

“ I'm not asking ; it is a command. Just stay quiet a minute while I go and get myself ready. I shan't be long.”

She smiled bewitchingly at him from the door ; and what is more to the point, she was as good as her word. She is not the sort that keeps men waiting, however much she may keep them guessing.

They descended from the taxi at the corner ; and telling the chauffeur to await their return, made their way along Bright Street.

There was a nasty greasy mud on the footpath, and a greasy smell of Little Italy in the air—little warm breaths of it suggestive of fried fish and rancid butter.

Michael kept watching the upper windows where Kelly had said the notice was displayed, and presently his eye alighted on : ‘ Needlework and Embroidery.’

He pointed this out to his companion, and they came to a halt outside an ice-cream ‘ parlour ’ which, in spite of its daubs and its dirt, was nevertheless a more respectable-looking tenancy than any in its immediate neighbourhood.

Esmée's eyes began to sparkle. She turned to Michael with a little intimate gesture, unexpectedly soft, and

which had characterised her attitude towards him once or twice of late. Quite subconscious on her part ; and on his too subtle for definition. Only it beckoned him into the very heart of her thoughts, as it were, making him feel extraordinarily near to her, and alone with her.

She said, in an excited whisper : " We really are—on the track of things this time."

He regarded her with a faint smile and nodded, carried away by the eagerness of her. " We'll see," he said, and opened the swing-door for her to pass through.

Followed an interview with a large, fat Neapolitan who stood behind the counter in shirt-sleeves, and with something of the pervading grease upon his face. When the girl had explained the nature of her errand, he said nothing, but called loudly upon his wife, who presently waddled into sight from the back premises—she being of an even greater proportion than her spouse—drying her huge bare arms on a very dirty end of her apron, and breathing great gusts of garlic at each step of her approach. At length, fetching up alongside, she stood and breathed stertorously, resting a small portion of her bulk on the counter, which groaned in consequence. Her beady black eyes, which seemed too small a fit for her face, fastened upon the two with suspicion. Then Esmée began to explain her wish of an interview with Miss di Conti relative to a commission for the execution of some needlework.

Smiling as she stated her business, you could see (as Michael declared afterwards) suspicion melt. And finally the good lady, getting under way laboriously, propelled herself along at a tank-like waddle towards the stairs. There she commenced her tremendous ascent, explaining the difficulty she had with her breath before she started, and fully justifying the assertion before she had finished.

So the two followed the panting, amorphous wife of the ice-creamier at a snail's pace up an unspeakably dirty

staircase, the crazy boards of which groaned at every step. Esmée, who went second, turned round every now and then upon Michael with the round-eyed, impish mischief of a gamin, little ripples of laughter she could not keep back escaping her all the way.

"She's a wonder!" she whispered.

"One of the Alpini."

"It's the stairs I admire."

"It's the woman," he laughed.

It was Esmée who knocked; there was a note of challenge to it. The fat Italian stood and panted, then turned without a word and breathed her way down to the ground floor once more.

Meanwhile the door had opened noiselessly, and Esmée gave a little start. For there, in the opening, stood a girl whose pallid face had the sweetness of expression and all the placid beauty of a Madonna—just as Kelly had said. Her great dark eyes, soft as a doe's, fell upon her visitors with a calm, questioning glance, and she waited in perfect silence for them to speak.

Kelly's description of the girl should have led Michael to expect something of the sort, but he certainly was not prepared for this. Had he been alone, he would have found no words to meet the situation, and would have faced her, tongue-tied, like a raw youth snubbed into silence. As it was, thinking of the errand on which he had come, he experienced a sense of shame as he encountered the sheer sadness of the girl's glance. It was Esmée who came to the rescue.

"Good-morning," she said, "I am addressing Miss di Conti—is it not?"

The girl bowed but did not speak, and Esmée continued in a manner which, for her, was curiously hesitating:

"I—I have been told about your needlework."

"Yes, madame," the other replied, but with a certain

stateliness, as though she were about to confer, not to receive, a favour. Scarcely a trace of foreign accent was noticeable in her soft, low voice.

"Then may we come in? I should be so glad if you could find it convenient to undertake a little work for me."

The swift perception of Esmée was what so pleased Michael. She who had come to condemn, was treating this poor girl with a deference from which all trace of the underlying sympathy was carefully excluded.

The girl held the door open for them, and said: "Will you be pleased to enter?"

The room in which they found themselves was as dismal as you would have expected it to be in that quarter of Soho. The wallpaper—where it had not already peeled off—was of an ugliness incredible, the ceiling stained and blackened, and the plaster scaling. Yet there was a cleanliness about the room, in odd contrast to the outside squalor. An orderliness, too, though the wretched furniture spoke of better days. It was just that indefinable air of grace and refinement with which the present owner had imbued it, and which betrayed the gentlewoman of fastidious nicety. Nothing tangible; a few odd ornaments, two old prints, a dainty hanging; and all of them in the right place. That and the clean freshness of the room itself.

As soon as she entered, Esmée had taken firm control. She explained her needs, entering into a mass of detail into which no masculine mind would care to venture.

The light in the room was good, and Michael found himself studying the Italian girl's face. How beautiful it was; but how delicate, with its tell-tale flush and its wistfulness! A little cough she gave at times, but holding it back as long as she could.

"Have you been in England long?" Esmée was asking.

"About a month."

"And your friends, are they living in London?"

"There are the good people below who own the house. They were in the service of my family long ago."

Esmée looked at her aghast. "And is that all?" she asked, her voice vibrant with pity. "Surely you have some relatives here?"

"No," came the wistful answer.

Michael perceived that the only thought left in Esmée's mind was to help, and that the impulse of her generous heart was carrying her away. So when she said: "Oh, I *am* sorry!" he was not unprepared for what followed.

But the other girl's attitude stiffened in an instant. She stood looking from one to the other, very pale and very quiet.

"Did anyone send you to me?" she asked at last in a tone of icy formality. "I have a dread of charity," and she gave a little shiver. "I am a di Conti—I do not accept," she said, holding herself proudly.

Odd how family pride should skip one generation to emerge in the next.

If Michael felt desperately sorry for the girl, the effect on Esmée was instantaneous. She moved up to her with outstretched hands.

"My dear," she said, a glimmer of unshed tears under her long lashes, "it is I who am asking. Won't you do me the favour of helping me with this needlework? . . . And—won't you let us be friends?"

Now when Miss Esmée looks at you in this way, it is a foregone conclusion. There is that in her asking which makes refusal unthinkable. The girl was visibly touched.

"You are too kind, I cannot think . . ." She broke off, and looked hastily away.

But Esmée was not to be denied. That coaxing quality had come into her voice when she continued: "You must come to me—in the country, you know. And we'll do the work together there. Ple-ease."

Michael had turned away. When he looked again, the two girls were smiling into each other's eyes.

"Michael," said Esmée, "a week from to-day, you will motor Miss di Conti and myself to Marley Pryors. Don't forget."

Alas ! the best-laid plans of a kind heart are not always realised. When the time came round and they called again at Bright Street, it was to find the bird flown, without a hint of her whereabouts to be had from the Italian and his wife, both of whom were grown lowering and suspicious.

But to return to the present, we find them getting into the taxi again and in silence, this their last clue having ended seemingly in nothing. Once inside, it occurred to Michael that if he went on talking it might make it easier for her ; but she soon saw through that. Besides, however downcast she might be, she was not content to remain inactive long.

"Heigho ! " she said, sinking back in the taxi with a sigh. " And that's the end of that."

Her violet eyes grew grave and wistful. But next instant she was sitting up, a very resolute look about her face and her little fists rolled up tight.

"We *will* do it yet. For oh ! it has been so ghastly for him, Michael. I noticed such a change when I visited him last. If it goes on much longer, will it be Dick who comes out of it to us ? The same old Dick ? Sometimes I wonder. And—and it frightens me."

She had a look that saw far into the future as she spoke. After a pause, she said, with a sigh that almost ended in a sob before she was ever aware of it :

"Ah ! it is a sad old world. That poor girl, too ! I am so distressed about her. And such a dreadful cough ! Poor thing, she could not raise her hand to hurt a fly."

"Just what Kelly said."

"Oh, bother Kelly ! " she exclaimed.

After that Michael maintained a prolonged silence. But she went on, communing with herself aloud :

"She will need a lot of feeding-up, and fresh air and kindness. And it will be rather lovely having her to look after. She is so beautiful. . . . Don't you think so, Michael?"

"I beg your pardon?" Michael wakened out of a long reverie into which he had fallen.

"One says plain 'what?' when it's a friend one's addressing. Nothing more cumbrous, thank you. Don't you think Miss di Conti the most beautiful thing you have ever seen?—that was the question."

She looked at him beneath lowered lids; and Michael took his time to answer it.

"Yes," he said, "she is not bad looking, I daresay."

She opened her eyes wide. "I've no patience with that sort of thing," she announced. "But you *shall* enthuse, Michael. You will come down and help me to entertain her. And then—we'll see."

'Every nice woman is a match-maker, as well as a mother, at heart. He'll be beautifully tender to the woman he marries,' she was thinking. 'He won't want to "own," but to be a comrade.'

Before he left her at the door, "I *do* like you, Mickey," she said, stroking his sleeve in a soothing way she has. "At least, I rather love you for this: that you refrain from saying all the things you might so well have said."

The door closed behind her, and she was gone.

In the days which followed, there were times—and these grew more numerous as clue after clue failed them—when Michael almost came to wonder if there were not something after all in Bailey's theory of an evil influence hanging over that 'Room of Death.' Other thoughts, too, kept entering his mind which he would not admit even to himself.

And so the time wore on towards the day of the trial, and Esmée's cheerfulness grew a little more wistful, though her courage never failed.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE Marley mystery had become a *cause célèbre*. On the first day the trial opened, the approach to the county courthouse was thronged with people, many of them from among Dick's intimate friends, or from among the outer circle of his acquaintanceship. But to Michael, a strong-nerved man and unsusceptible to morbid impressions, they seemed like vultures circling down upon their feast of death.

It was an icy day outside, but his blood was on fire ; every fibre of his body was tense and overwrought in his struggle to maintain an outward calm. Within the Court itself was an atmosphere of nameless dread.

Esmée was there with her father. Her face lit up as she caught sight of Michael, and she gave him a brave little smile and a nod of her head. All the same, she was very pale, and her lips pressed close together.

The opening speech was over. The prosecution produced its witnesses in a formidable sequence. Dick looked wan, but he sat proud and motionless, resting his chin on his hands as he listened to the mass of evidence piled up against him. His prospects were growing black. Many in the Court, his friends included, regarded him as doomed already. But not a trace of emotion showed, save perhaps for a quivering of the thin, dilated nostrils ; not a sign of flinching for the world to see.

Once he glanced at Michael, and a faint smile—the

ghost of its old reckless self—rose to his lips. Michael smiled back, and all the time his heart was dead within him.

For a time Michael was conscious only of a hum of voices. But Dick—being tried for the murder of old Jimmy! That was the awful central fact round which his attention circled.

And how absurd! Surely a nightmare madness, he argued, his mind travelling back to far-off times: from their school-days to Oxford, and then out into the world beyond, where, though their friendship never faltered, they had seen less of each other, Dick making himself popular in society with leisure at his command and a genius for getting through his money—a fact which the prosecution were to follow up in detail and to make the most of before the trial was ended.

It was the sound of a remembered voice that brought Michael back with a start to his surroundings. Peters was in the witness-box, describing the finding of the body in sepulchral tones, and avoiding none of the harrowing details in the telling.

Then the prosecution examined him: "You have been long in the family?"

"Served the late master faithfully for fifteen years, sir."

"You have then observed the accused over a period of years. Have you ever had occasion to suspect him of a temper which might one day lead to violence?"

Peters squinted down the length of his nose. "Sir," said he, "it is not for the likes of me to say."

He hesitated, then, with a show of reluctance, admitted a knowledge of the accused's hot temper. Pressed still further:

"An instance of it?" he queried, moistening his lips with his tongue. "Well, there was, sir, now as you ask

the question, and as I am bound to answer truthfully in the sight of God and man. But it occurred when Mr. Dick was but a boy. Too trivial to recall."

He lowered his eyes to the ground; and Michael, who was now watching him closely, would have given a lot to have read what was in the depth of his mind at the moment.

"Pray let us have it, for all that."

But this the judge disallowed, and counsel amended the question.

"Have you ever noticed anything strained in the relations between the accused and deceased—the more recent relations?"

"I have and I haven't, sir. They've had their little disagreements; but nothing as you might call violent. Leastways, not to my knowledge." This he uttered darkly, as though leaving it to be inferred that there were those who could vouch for it, if they would.

As he stepped down from the witness-box his eyes met Michael's. There was a momentary gleam in them, whether of malevolence Michael could never rightly say: but it was swiftly gone, though the scar disfiguring his forehead was a livid scar and seemed to twitch to life as he moved past, his eyes once more on the ground.

Michael recalled the incident of that scar. Dick, then a boy of sixteen, in one of his ungovernable fits of temper, had lashed out at Peters, who was the cause of his annoyance, with the result that the man slipped and in falling had cut his head badly against the fire-irons. More than once in the past it had occurred to Michael that Peters, with all his powers of repression, was a man who never forgave.

Then came the medical evidence of Capper, which placed twelve o'clock and three o'clock as the limits of time between which the murder could have been committed.

“I say murder,” he announced in his cocksure tones, his cold green eyes protruding like gooseberries from his head. “Because in my opinion death could not have occurred otherwise—no matter what the defence may have to say in that respect.”

He perked his head defiantly in the direction of Sir Charles Barker, who sat smiling urbanely upon him.

Capper then proceeded to explain—and with considerable clarity and conciseness, it must be confessed—the relative positions of the bullet’s entry and the position of the pistol on the floor, deducing his theory of murder, over which he lingered gloatingly. Further, he recalled the state of mental distress which he had observed in the accused during the examination of the body. There was a forcible assurance in the way in which he delivered his evidence that carried conviction with it. Certainly a ‘hanging doctor’ if ever there was one, but overdoing it, perhaps, in the view of the more fastidious of the jury-men.

But the shadow in the Court had crept in closer.

Sir Charles Barker, counsel for the defence, rose to his commanding height ; polished, silken tongued, and coldly smiling. He was a great gaunt man, with a hawk-like nose and a chin thrust fiercely up to meet it. There was something reassuring about him as he turned upon his old opponent with a steely look.

“Now, Dr. Capper,” he began in his slowest drawl, “will you be so good as to attend to me for a moment?”

Capper caught fire at once ; his coldness left him. The Court settled down, with a sigh, to listen, and the coughing and the shuffling almost ceased.

“I understand you to say that the position of the pistol, taken in conjunction with the point at which the bullet entered, is the chief reason—in fact, your only reason—for

stating that death could be due to no other cause than murder ? ”

“ Yes,” snapped Capper.

“ And that the position of the pistol is incompatible with the idea of suicide ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ You do not mean to say that it was quite impossible for the deceased to have fired the shot himself, no matter how unusual the position, or the angle ? ”

“ I never said so.’

“ Quite so,” Barker said soothingly, which made his deprecating suavity more provoking than ever. “ Now supposing the deceased had fired the shot himself at this unnatural angle, will you please tell the Court precisely where the pistol would have dropped—I mean, relatively to the position in which you found it ? ”

Capper hesitated. He feared a trap. He feared still more the veiled ridicule which would be his lot should he temporise. He answered sullenly :

“ About a foot to a foot and a half to the rear.”

“ Do you, Dr. Capper, mean to tell the Court that you can say to within six inches the position at which the pistol would have come to rest, making due allowance for rebound as it struck the ground ? ”

Barker’s smile was superior, and you could see the pomposity ooze out of Capper, who became flustered, and ended by thoroughly losing his temper—just what was wanted of him.

“ In the supposition you make, any rebound which—which might have occurred, should have carried the pistol further to the rear of the actual position in which it was found, as already stated. It—it is quite plain,” he stuttered.

Had he kept his temper, he could have made his meaning perfectly clear ; but he was growing incoherent. Here,

then, was the opening. Barker pounced, and you could almost have imagined the clash of the hawk's impact upon its prey, in the manner of it.

"So you have *not* made any allowance for rebound after all, Dr. Capper." He glanced across at the jury with a meaning smile before turning round deliberately and fastening his gaze on the judge.

Capper could still have righted himself had he regained his calm ; instead of that, his temper rose.

"I suppose you know more about it than I who saw it," he snarled, glaring at counsel for the defence.

"No, I have only heard the facts. But," and here he paused to give full force to the point he was making, "but I have got an open mind."

"Meaning I have not ? "

Barker smiled and shrugged his shoulders, a gesture conveying to the Court the meaning : 'Wear it if the cap fits.'

"Meaning," he drawled, "that there is a little thing called 'rebound' which I have not lost sight of and which you apparently have."

"I have not—I——"

"Oh, now you recollect it, of course. . . . Thank you, Dr. Capper, that is really all I have to ask you."

And Capper sat down, a raging, baffled look on his face. A suppressed titter went round the Court ; the antagonism was well enough known to the public, and there was little doubt in which direction the public sympathy lay.

But this was the one bright spot. There was evidence to follow which was damning enough.

During the course of his examination, Bailey had to admit—as Michael after him—that James Marley was well and cheery when they bade him good-night. Bailey repeated what had been elicited from him when the case came up before the magistrate.

Yes, he had seen the accused after retiring to his room.

"When was that?" he was asked.

"I should say about one hour after going to my room."

"That would bring the time to about 1.30 a.m.," counsel for the Crown remarked. "Pray continue."

"The wind had kept me awake. It was during a lull in the storm that I heard him passing my door on his way to his room. I called to him, and when he entered we chatted and smoked for about half an hour."

Asked if accused had shown any signs of perturbation, Bailey paused before replying:

"No, I do not recollect anything of the sort."

"And you heard nothing after that?"

"Nothing. I fell asleep."

It was obvious to Michael that Bailey had replied with difficulty in the negative, and there fell upon him a nameless dread of the questions that might be sprung upon him. There was always the fear of that one question cropping up, and it had robbed him of his self-confidence from the moment of his entering the Court.

As the thought was passing through Michael's mind, Bailey stepped down from the witness-box. Michael's turn had come.

His heart kept thumping against his ribs as he took the oath. It was Dick's life that hung on the balance, against which an ill-considered reply might turn the scales; and thought of this distracted him at first, making him almost nervous. His power of concentration left him, the coughs and noises of the Court irritated him abnormally.

But counsel for the Crown was on his feet, and, when he began to question, a great calm came over Michael, until he lost consciousness of every other personality in the Court. His forceful detachment had returned to him.

After some relatively unimportant questions, counsel said: "You are a friend of the accused, Mr. Frayne?"

" Yes.

" A great—in fact, a lifelong friend ? "

" Yes."

" Then you are probably aware of the financial straits into which the accused had fallen, and regarding which evidence will be produced shortly ? "

This Michael admitted, smothering back his first inclination to temporise.

" Will you please tell us when he mentioned them to you ? Or better, let me put it to you this way," he went on, watching witness's face narrowly : " Was it before the tragedy occurred ? "

Michael thought for a moment before he spoke. Interest in the case quickened. Evidence of that there was in the muffled silence. The old lady at the back stopped clearing her throat. Even the judge leaned forward to listen the more intently. It was one of these curious lulls when the mind of the crowd is swayed, as it were, by a common impulse.

" Yes," he said at last in a level voice, meeting counsel's eye without flinching.

" Was the deceased aware, at that time, of the facts ? "

The frown kept gathering on Michael's face, but he answered calmly : " I believe not."

A draught from an open door rustled the papers counsel held in his hand. There was an imperceptible pause. Then :

" Did the accused tell you, or did he say anything to lead you to suppose that he contemplated confessing the facts to his uncle ? "

Here it was at last—the chill foreboding that had been haunting him ever since the morning, and which had assumed a definite, a menacing shape at last. The question that would tend to fasten the noose about Dick's neck.

And it was he—Dick's friend—who was called upon to answer.

Michael was at war with himself as he listened to the voice, inexorable as fate, repeat the question.

"I am afraid, Mr. Frayne, I must press you for an answer to that question." It was the judge who had interposed.

In the Court, dead silence. But all at once, Michael was aware of the Court clock beating a thunderous time with his heart as it ticked its way on to eternity. The sound rose to a deafening pitch; it was marking out the moments of a man's doom.

The lie was already forming on his lips. Suddenly a voice, cold, clear, and perfectly calm:

"Yes, I told him."

Another silence, more stifling than the last. Then the gasp of indrawn breaths, like a flutter of invisible wings.

"Yes, I told him," Dick repeated in ringing tones. "And I don't care who knows it. I have nothing to conceal. I am innocent."

He looked very handsome in his defiance, his head thrown back in its pride of youth, and his fine dark eyes flashing a reckless fire. The colour had returned to his cheeks. It was Dick once more—the old Dick, in one of his supreme moments.

Every eye was straining on the figure in the dock, gallantly defending his friend's honour at his own life's risk. A wave of emotion swept through every member of the Court. A murmur was in the air; the jury was visibly impressed. Michael glanced round and beheld Esmée—her head erect, her face flushed and eyes shining. Love for Dick was filling his own heart; the protective instinct of the man was roused to its fullest.

Barker, leaping to his feet, seemed to tower above the situation. He was a man of considerable dramatic sense,

and here was the time to register his effect, when emotions were aroused.

"Can you positively assert that it was the accused's intention to confess to his uncle? Was it on the very night of the murder—meaning that the deceased was unaware of the facts before?"

To both of which questions Michael replied in the affirmative, beginning to have an inkling into the drift of them.

"And you understand it was his intention to do this after you and Mr. Bailey had retired to bed?"

"Yes."

"You have known the deceased for practically all your life. Now do you think he was the man to disown the nephew who was his only near relative alive, and whom he had brought up as his own son?"

"Absolutely not."

"But even if such had been his intention, do you think he was the man to act on the impulse of the moment?"

"He never would, of that I am certain."

"Yet he must have proceeded to change his will in front of the accused if the motive alleged by the prosecution is to carry any weight; and drafted and signed a fresh will there and then, if the charred fragment of paper produced by the prosecution is to have any part in condemning the accused." Barker held the attention of the jury as he said this, then turning again to Michael: "Was there any threat to the deceased's life from another quarter altogether?"

"There was." And Michael referred to it briefly, in his curt, concise way.

Barker then remarked that he would presently produce evidence to show that the deceased contemplated alterations in his will in connection with these very threats, and

long before he had ever heard of his nephew's financial entanglements. And with that he sat down.

There followed some evidence for the prosecution, of minor importance, and by five o'clock the Court had adjourned.

And so ended the first day of the trial.

CHAPTER XXVIII

BAILEY and Michael left the Court together. It was market-day in the sleepy old country town; the streets were crowded with a chattering, laughing throng of country folk.

Coming from a scene wherein a man's life was at stake, and that man his dearest friend, the gaiety of the outside world bit into Michael's consciousness. He hurried along with grave and frowning face.

The trial had upset Bailey to an even greater extent, as was to be looked for in a nature so highly strung and so profoundly emotional as his. The expression of horror had not yet faded from his eyes. He was nervous as a child; his fingers twitched, and the lines about his sensitive mouth were drawn and hard.

"What do you think of it?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

In spite of the cold, there were tiny beads of sweat on his forehead.

"He'll win through," Michael answered with set jaw.

At the street corner a miserable relic of humanity, blind and a cripple, sat huddled up, a pitiful bunch of laces in his hand. Bailey fell behind. "Poor devil!" Michael heard him mutter in a voice that was tense with pity; and glancing back, saw him slip a piece of silver into the old man's hand.

"On an icy day like this it hurts, you know," he explained apologetically as he caught Michael up. "It

seems such a shame that some people have all they want in the world, and to spare, while others have to go without all the time. I'm a bit of a socialist in a way. . . . Besides, it hurts to see a fellow like that." And he seemed easier in his mind afterwards.

Bailey was a curious mixture of incongruous qualities; there were many facets to his character. He had ever been an enigma to Michael, from that first day at school when he had seen him stand up to a boy twice his size in defence of a still smaller boy who had richly deserved the hiding he was getting. There was a vivid picture of Bailey's pale, sensitive face, twitching from nervous apprehension of what he was doing, and a sort of fascinated horror in his glittering eyes as he took what was coming to him with an almost unnatural pluck. Odd that the memory should have recurred now. He covertly watched his companion as they walked, seeing in the man many traits he remembered in the schoolboy: quixotic, sensitive to a degree, emotional. But Michael, simple himself, and direct in vision as in action, was unable—or he did not take the trouble—to follow any such complexities and contradictions.

The two men had walked some little distance along the main street before they singled out Esmée and the vicar among the crowd in front of them.

"What about tea?" Michael suggested as he noticed the Favorils enter a large confectioner's shop with 'Tea Room' superscribed above its lintel.

Bailey assented.

Esmée caught sight of them as soon as they entered, and beckoned them over to her table, the vicar welcoming them with his vague smile.

The vicar had an indeterminate chin and a vague indecisiveness. He was a scholarly old gentleman with the classical mind of a dilettante, and a kindly disposition;

and he submitted with a good grace to the home rule of his only child, of whom he was extremely fond in his irresponsible way. Indeed, Esmée's attitude towards her father was maternal in its protectiveness rather than filial. 'She has a will of her own, the vicar would say. 'Well, these are changing times we live in, and we have got to change with the—er, times,' he would add, and vaguely leave it at that. To see the two together made you wonder whence she derived her resolute character, unless it could have been from the mother who had died in giving her birth. Possibly, too, the age and the times were responsible for developing such a strength of personality in the short twenty years' span of her existence.

The vicar and Bailey found much in common. They discoursed learnedly concerning frescoes and mosaics, while Esmée turned to Michael.

"Wasn't Dick just splendid," she exclaimed, "speaking up as he did! I could have hugged him for that, in front of everyone."

"It was," said he, "just Dick."

Then she said, swinging off at a tangent, as is sometimes her custom: "Oh, Michael, didn't you hate him?"

"The doctor?"

"Yes. The very thought of him makes me creep. I've told dad he is never to be allowed near the vicarage. I could almost—yes, I really did love Sir Charles Barker. He was all over the little man in a second. It was lovely to watch him go down, like a balloon when you've stuck a pin in it."

The small round face broke into a smile. But, downcast the next instant, she asked him what was to be the end of it.

Michael actually did not know what to think. Barker had made one or two points in their favour which helped to neutralise the bad; but allowing for these, he still was

filled with an apprehension he was grimly trying to throw off. What he said was :

“We’ll have to wait for to-morrow. But—we’ll win through.”

“Oh, Mickey,” she leaned towards him, lowering her voice, “life is a dreadful thing—I never knew how terrible till now. Here we are, Dick’s dearest friends, having tea in comfort ; talking of things—and, yes, laughing ; while he lies there alone—waiting. It will take so much to make up to him—afterwards.”

She clenched her little fists until all the blood was driven from them, and her great eyes rested on him in a mute appeal. Her trust and confidence was a memory which was to remain with him.

“Yes, life is a far worse thing than I ever thought it could be. It is so—so unheeding. There is such an isolation when the time comes. And in the end we have to go out alone—pass into space by ourselves. Sometimes it frightens me . . . Mickey.”

Her hand touched his ; a fluttering of her fingers—and it was gone. The wistfulness of her beauty hurt him. . . .

There had been a lull in the conversation, and Bailey now turned to the girl in his graceful way.

“Yes,” he said, “life is a curious admixture of tragedy and farce. And man, in much the same way, is his own paradox.”

He must have sensed rather than heard the turn their conversation had taken. He was a man who fell in readily with a mood of the moment ; there was always inconsistency as well as versatility in his talents. He laid himself out to interest her, gradually monopolising her attention almost against her own volition.

Bailey’s expression as a rule was gloomy and distraught ; but conversing on a subject which interested him he could be all animation in a moment. At such times his fine dark eyes would become extraordinarily brilliant and

his features light up. His eloquence would grip his audience with the fascination of it. He was passionately fond of art. Indeed, beauty in any form would give an exquisite pleasure to his highly-strung nature. The girl seemed to bring out the best that was in him, and she listened to his talk, spellbound, while Michael maintained a silence, admiring the versatility of his friend, and himself unable to cope with the vicar's frescoes. The vicar continued to discuss them from many standpoints. Michael listened respectfully, and tried to look wise.

But when they left the tea-room the girl quickly attached herself to Michael, leaving the vicar and Bailey to follow behind.

"Michael." She spoke softly after a silence in which she kept looking up at him.

"Yes?"

"Do you know, I don't think I much like clever people after all."

Michael smiled and nodded. "Bailey is clever—or is it I?" he asked.

But to this she made no reply.

It was the last day of the trial. Excitement had risen to a fever pitch.

The examination of the last witness was drawing to a close. Michael gazed fixedly at the jury; some of them were familiar to him as local tradesmen, but their faces were inscrutable now as the sphinx. It was between these and the clock that he divided his attention. Both had the same inexorable expression, only that of the clock grew grimmer as the black hands crept ruthlessly round it.

Kelly was in Court, as before, but never once returned Michael's gaze. There was a suppressed excitement about him as he watched the proceedings; his little eyes kept flickering incessantly.

All at once the drone of voices ceased. There was a rustling in the Court, a shuffling of feet, and above all else that spasmodic coughing which had pervaded Michael's senses so persistently.

He looked up to find that the last witness had left the box. People were preparing themselves for the last scene of all in a grim tragedy. Again that feeling of unreality swept over him. It was Dick whose life trembled in the balance, Dick whom he had protected before now. Oh, but it was all absurd! A hideous nightmare from which he must awaken if only he could strive hard enough. . . .

Jervase was prosecuting for the Crown, and his summing-up was a terrible one. According to him, there could be but one decision. This : that the accused, who had raised money on the reversion of his uncle's will, had at last been compelled to confess the fact ; and finding that his uncle's intention was to disinherit him in consequence, had had recourse to murder. The motive was the strong feature of the case, but there was plenty of corroborative evidence besides, and this he would briefly summarise.

There was the fact that the accused was one of a probable four to know of the secret panel wherein the pistol lay. There was the charred fragment of paper, plainly part of a legal document. He submitted that the deceased had, on the fatal night, outlined a new will in the presence of his nephew with the intention of giving effect to it as soon as morning afforded him the opportunity ; and that it was then that the accused resolved upon the murder of his uncle. It was known that he had a pistol in his room of the same calibre.

Evidence served to indicate that the accused must have bade his uncle good-night, gone to fetch his pistol, then returned from the outside and through the conservatory door, thus coming on his victim from behind the portière and shooting him. The fall of snow over-

night and the subsequent thaw had removed any traces which might otherwise have remained of the accused's approach from outside. This, he admitted, was the link that was missing. It was unlikely that anyone could steal up through the great length of the hall without attracting deceased's attention, and the method of approach—to which every other circumstance also pointed—must have been the one already indicated, though no direct evidence of that had come to light.

Michael listened to this with tightened jaw. There was a grim look about his face as he thought of the half-smoked cigarette which he had found—and concealed. Had he not discovered it in time, Dick would not have had even a fighting chance of his life. He sat very still and listened to Jervase, who was continuing.

The evidence of the doctor removed, in his opinion, any idea of suicide for which there was admittedly no motive, and the signs of which none of those who had last seen him alive had detected—or indeed could associate him with.

"Then," said Jervase impressively, "fearing the consequences and trying to conceal the evidence of a crime—the murder of an uncle and benefactor—the accused had taken the deceased's pistol from its secret resting-place, and set it on the ground so that suicide should be inferred. But, fortunately for the ends of law and justice . . ." And so on to an impressive finish.

Barker's speech for the defence was a masterpiece of forensic eloquence. He began by admitting that there was nothing in the deceased's past, or in his character, to lead to the suspicion of suicide, except—and here he paused—except in that curious choice of an old gloom-ridden hall for use as a sitting-room. It was a place haunted by old tragic memories.

He was not, he averred, a superstitious man himself. In fact, he regarded himself as normal, with a normal

man's outlook on things. But he would not dream of occupying a room in which two suicides had occurred in the past, were he given a choice in the matter ; and would challenge any other sane man to an occupation now of what had popularly become known as the ' Room of Death.'

" I do not go so far as to say that I ascribe the death of James Marley to any preternatural agency. But——" and he made another of his effective pauses, while fixing the jury with his gaze. " The history of the room is undoubtedly a curious one, where there have been unusual happenings more than once in the past. Who could say what influence might cling, urging a man to his death ? For the influence of thought and its permanence as a record is a force which will have to be reckoned with when the clouds of superstition and of charlatanism which presently veil it are brushed aside."

It was thus, by subtle suggestion, that counsel for defence appealed for a moment to that superstitious streak of which few men's minds are wholly free. Much had been made in the newspapers of the hauntings of the old house, as has already been stated, and the public imagination was in a ripe state of mind to receive the impression which counsel was bent on stamping on it.

Swiftly he passed on to physical facts. The theory of murder, he maintained, had not been definitely established, in which connection he made another thinly-veiled attack on Dr. Capper. And even if murder were assumed, then motive was the only fact that could be proved against the accused. But what of the threats levelled against deceased's life from another quarter altogether, the evidence regarding which was irrefutable ?

" Nay, stronger. We have it on unimpeachable authority that the deceased intended giving effect to a will to exclude all heirs of one who had threatened his life, and that the draft of this had been submitted to him for

signature. This was some time previous to the tragedy, and there is strong reason to suppose that deceased had carried out his intention in the meantime.

“On the other hand, the deceased had only known of his nephew’s difficulties an hour or two before he had met with his death, and consequently had had no reasonable time in which to execute a fresh will. Therefore the probability was (he submitted) that the will destroyed was one which it was the interest of the other party to destroy and had nothing whatsoever to do with the accused. After all, it was mere assumption on the part of the prosecution that the deceased had formed any intention of disinheriting his nephew. Whereas it was not assumption that a draft will was in existence (and since missing), disinheriting the other ; it was fact.

“You cannot hang a man on mere assumption. A man’s life must hang on a less slender thread than that.”

And so, bit by bit, he sheared through the weakest links in the chain of evidence against the accused by throwing doubt upon them and by suggesting alternatives. The fact that no trace had been found connecting any specific person or persons with the threats against the deceased’s life, he passed over in guarded silence. The whole trend of his defence was to suggest other possibilities and to give them as great a semblance of probability as might be. And of this he made a conspicuous success.

“Gentlemen of the jury,” he concluded, “I would adjure you not to send a man to his death on this tissue of inferences. Bear in mind the probability of other alternatives before arriving at your verdict.”

And with a few more words to this effect, counsel for the defence resumed his seat.

The jury cannot have been absent for more than half an hour, yet it seemed to Michael as though days had fled and nights passed before they filed back again. There

was a curious buzzing in his head as he waited for their words.

“Not guilty.”

The verdict was received in dead silence. There was a pause, then the Court stirred to life once more.

CHAPTER XXIX

EXCEPT that Dick was free, the position was much as it had been before, and the solution of the mystery as far off as ever it had been. This was the opinion which Michael expressed to M'Kerrel, to whom he paid a visit the day after the trial.

"I am afraid," he said, "that a considerable section of the public will continue to regard poor Dick with suspicion until it is cleared up."

"Aye!" M'Kerrel returned, stroking his chin, "it may be so. In Scotland the verdict might have been one of Not Proven."

"And an English jury, having no such loophole, have given him the benefit of the doubt?"

"Just that."

"Well, we are not going to let it rest there. Dick is free, but the task is not yet ended." Michael looked very grim and determined as he spoke.

"H'm," said M'Kerrel. "And what is Kelly saying to it all? Yon's not the man to leave a job half-finished, once he's taken it in hand."

In answer, Michael had then to admit the pass to which matters had come between Kelly and himself. The older man chuckled drily.

"Man, was not that what I was telling you from the beginning? He is a quick-tempered little Celtic body and not slow to take offence. But I'll be meeting him myself one of these days, and I'll see what he has to say for himself."

It was a day or two later that Michael encountered Kelly emerging from his office in his usual hurry.

"Hullo, Kelly!" he sang out in his hearty voice. "I was on my way to see you to say that I hope you are going to carry on for us. We are not at the end of the road yet, even though our man has been acquitted."

Kelly's face grew shinier in the morning sun, which melted all trace of rancour from it.

"Sure," he said with a grin. "And if you want to know the truth of it, I was just after the same myself when you stopped me. I will be taking another run down to the old house one of these days." Then, cocking his head on one side and peering up at Michael, he said: "You'll be wanting to know what it is I'm after this time?"

"Of course I do, Kelly."

"Well, and I'll not be telling you, except that it is eliminating I am." He spoke in the best of humour.

But not another word could be got out of him, though there was more of assurance than Michael remembered to have experienced before.

Dick had gone off immediately after his acquittal. He was going into the heart of the country.

"I do not know where," he said. "But I must get the prison air out of my lungs. I want to wallow in the sunshine and to forget. And I want to be alone. Don't think me ungrateful, old fellow. I know what you have all done for me and I shall never forget. But just for a bit I want to be alone."

Michael had to leave it at that, appreciating a little of what the other must be feeling, but not understanding altogether except what was plain to the eye—that his friend had not wholly recovered his balance after the awful experience through which he had passed. Then

it flashed across his mind that Dick would be meeting Esmée, and not wishing to take anyone into his confidence until the whole of that was settled. Therefore he did not venture further, but turned, with a sigh, to other things.

A fortnight passed, and no word from Dick. Michael could not understand it. Each day he had anticipated news of the engagement, and each day the post had been a blank.

It was the first Sunday in February, but the morning broke as mild as a May day. Sun streamed in at the window, and there was a quiver of spring in the air as the old earth turned in its sleep. Faint as a breath, it was yet a promise—that, alas ! which is ever more joyous than the fulfilment.

Since the conclusion of the trial Michael had heard nothing from his friends in Marley Pryors ; and, fight as he would, with each day that passed the picture of a little piquant face and round violet eyes came dancing vision like before his gaze.

But on this morning there was the sun, as I have said, and Michael was young. A vague purpose brought him out of bed, singing ; though like Mr. Jorrocks of immortal memory, he knew but two songs—that which was ‘God Save the King,’ and that which wasn’t. He whistled them both as he entered the dining-room, and flung the window wide open.

It was early. The church bells had not yet begun to clang out. Instead, a small rude urchin in the street below, squinting cheekily up at him, commenced an exaggeration of the tune Michael was whistling and rendered purposely out of tune. But Michael listened and gave a great laugh, which was not at all for what that small boy hoped.

The balmy air had got into Michael’s blood, and as he

sat down to breakfast he had come to a decision. He would take a spin into the country ; possibly (and this is all he would admit to himself) in the direction of Marley ; lunch at the Marley Arms, and return in the evening.

At the gate of the vicarage he pulled up. He might, he reflected, be able to get some news there of Dick, so in he went.

I fancy Miss Esmée was pleased to see him. Anyhow her smile was dazzling as she held out her hands to him—both of them.

Michael stated the object of his visit to Marley Pryors—it was to inquire after Dick.

“So it was to ask about Dick that you paid us a visit ? ”

She looked towards the fire, a little curve forming about the corners of her lips. Then she picked up a piece of embroidery and fixed her attention upon that.

The vicar was understood to be wrestling with his thoughts in the study. Esmée called it having a nice long think, and said that he must not be wakened on any account. So the two had the room to themselves ; and as they sat by the fire and chatted Michael kept watching the transient lights that played hide-and-seek in her eyes as she bent over her needlework. The wonderful mobility of her face kept baffling him ; he was always wondering what would happen next. Yes, he concluded, it was good to see her again, and he gave a sigh of contentment which concerned the present and deliberately refused to contemplate the bare to-morrow.

“Was that the only reason ? ” she insisted, biting off a thread with her small white teeth. And then she darted a dazzling look at him from under her thick black lashes which captured one of his reluctant smiles, as was intended of it.

She laid down her work and began to rummage in a mauve satin bag by her side.

"Now it's no use pretending," she said, selecting a skein of silk, "that that's the only reason. . . . *Is it?* "

Michael laughed outright, that infectious, ringing laugh of his; and her laughter rippled back at him.

Presently, growing grave, he said: "Well, Dick is free now. And so—all obstacles are removed."

She turned away from him before she answered "Yes," staring out of the window.

"I should like to say——"

"Yes?" she prompted, her face still turned from him.

"That it has been a great happiness . . . I mean to say that I have greatly valued your friendship. You see, you are the first woman pal I have ever had," he explained boyishly. "I am not a woman's man—not that sort. They frighten me."

"A great strong man like you, Mickey!"

"But you don't."

"Oh!"

"Not now. You are different. . . . I used to think you were always laughing at me. I like it—now I know that we are pals. That's what makes the difference. I wanted to tell you, and to thank you . . ."

Then he embarked—somewhat quickly for Michael—on other topics. He had said what was in his mind, though he had only said a small portion of all he felt, being merely Michael. A camaraderie of this nature had been a revelation to him, but he was not the man to open out his heart.

A look of motherliness was in her eyes as she listened to the simple sincerity of the man, and a silence fell upon her. For once he had been able to have his share of the conversation.

Presently he rose to go.

"I've been wondering if now . . . That is, perhaps it would be better . . . What I mean is——"

"Better begin afresh," she suggested."

"Now that our partnership is ended . . ." No, he could not bring himself to refer to her relationship with Dick, nor could he question her point-blank.

She rose, letting slip her needlework, unheeded, to the ground.

"But indeed it is not ended," she murmured. "We haven't caught the murderer yet—for one thing. And people still suspect Dick. Ah no, Michael. . . ."

She put out her hand in that childlike, natural gesture so intimate and so compelling. She was very close to him, but he could not see her face, her eyes were on the ground. A small unruly curl almost brushed his cheek. The surpassing sweetness of a woman!

She looked up suddenly her breath on his cheek—almost it was a caress. . . .

Michael moved away. It was a moment before he was master of himself again. In a desperate need of something to say, he asked:

"When did you see Dick last? Of course we will solve the mystery and clear his name."

He avoided meeting her eyes. He need not have taken the trouble, for she too was looking away, her attention occupied with something in the garden.

"About a day after the trial. Or two days—oh, I forget which!"

She spoke a little breathlessly, and moved to the mantelshelf, where she stood for an instant patting the stray curl into place, covertly peeping at the mirror, with her head on one side. Then she turned round on him in all her customary serenity.

"To tell you the truth, Michael, I could not quite make him out. He was rather—well, curious in his manner. But he is like that at times. He is very complex for a man."

She stared thoughtfully, for a bit, into the fire.

"And then the awful time he has been through has affected him a great deal more than you would have imagined. He wants stirring out of himself, and we have got to do that for him. You and I between us, Michael."

He did not seem to care, she went on to explain, if the murderer was found or not; and to care as little for any suspicion that might still rest upon himself. He had laughed as he left, and said: "Oh, it will all come right, I suppose!"

"You know his curious way at times—as if it were a part of his nature to treat with humour all the gravest issues of a ridiculous universe, whether the person involved be himself or another? Well, he was in that sort of mood, only it was a worse one than I have ever seen him in before. He simply did not seem to care. Then he left me, saying he would see what could be done about it when he came back."

"And was that all?"

She did not reply at once. Then: "All that matters," she said at last.

So that was all she had to tell him!

"I think I understand," he said slowly. "I know him so well. He is hiding his feelings—perhaps acting a part until he feels he has cleared his name completely. There is the devil of a pride at the bottom of Dick's nature."

"Perhaps you are right."

"Of course I am right."

"Anyhow, I am glad you think so. . . . It's just like you Michael," she added softly.

"There never was a more chivalrous or honourable fellow than old Dick," he continued earnestly. "You remember what happened at the trial? How he spoke out when I faltered? I shall never forget it."

And she answered in almost a whisper: "Nor shall I. Ah, I do understand."

Then he told her of his meeting with Kelly, and how the little man seemed to be on the track of something big, and was resolved on keeping his own counsel until he had more tangible results to report. He added :

“It will be a race between Kelly and myself. I am more determined than ever I was to clear Dick’s name.”

A silence fell upon them. Michael was thinking what a good thing it was he had called at the vicarage. It showed him where the land lay with regard to these two—the dearest friends he had in the world. He was certain now of the cause of Dick’s holding back, and of his silence. Absurdly quixotic fellow that he was !

And she loved Dick, as anyone with half an eye could see ; even he, Michael, lacking as he was in his knowledge of a woman. So the one essential—and Michael always concentrated his energies on essentials—was the finding of the murderer. The avenging of old Jimmy’s death was incentive enough. But there was more than that now ; there was the happiness of a woman at stake, and he vowed he would devote himself to this without rest until he had won a way for her and for Dick. It would absorb his time, keep him from thinking.

Suddenly he was conscious of a dull pain at his heart. How long would it last ? Would it go on for ever ?

For the first time in his life Michael was rather dreading his own thoughts. He was not the man to show his feelings, but Esmée must have been watching him closely when she said :

“Why, Michael, how very formidable you look ! Just as you did when I first met you. . . . You know, you have changed a lot since then.”

“Then it is you who have changed me,” he answered simply. “And if I did look formidable, it was only because I was making up my mind to something.”

Poor Michael ! He had not yet learned that there are

things fore-ordained from the beginning, and inevitable as Fate itself. He was still young enough to fight against the stars in their courses.

Her gaze caught his and held it. "Yes?" she said, a slight change in her voice, her face grown a little pale. "And pray—what was that something?"

"What I have already told you: to clear Dick's name, and so—to help you both to happiness at last."

"Oh, Mickey," she cried, a little catch in her voice, "you are rather splendid. . . ."

Then her colour returned, and she began to laugh to herself. But it was the softest laughter in all the world.

After he had left, the needlework lay idly on her lap a long while.

CHAPTER XXX

SUBCONSCIOUS cerebration is a physical fact beyond dispute. Go to bed at night faced with a problem, or a name the memory of which has escaped you, and as often as not you will waken with the solution, either partial or in its entirety; or with the name you have searched your mind for the night before. It is much the same with intuition, only it is subliminal to a greater degree, and seemingly instantaneous, inasmuch as its effect is arrived at with less conscious effort.

In the beginning I have held that Michael, in spite of a lack of imagination, had the power of intuition latent within him. And the time has come for a proof of what was then foreshadowed.

It was perfectly correct what Esmée had said regarding Dick's attitude subsequent to his release, as Michael was to discover for himself when the two friends met about a week after the events just narrated.

Dick seemed perfectly content to pursue the line of least resistance, and to relinquish the solving of the mystery. It was difficult to understand his feeling in the matter, except on the surmise that prison had sapped some of the tougher fibres of his nature. Still, it did not fit in with any of Michael's preconceived conceptions of Dick.

"I am fed up with England!" Dick announced, flinging himself into a chair and staring moodily into the fire.

"What possible difference can it make to old Jimmy whether we do or do not slip the noose round the right man's neck? It can't bring him to life again, and what remains concerns myself. What matter if people do suspect me? I'm clearing out of the country. I don't mind."

Michael stared at him, and the lines on his face deepened. He answered gravely: "Perhaps not. But possibly someone—some of your friends—mind for you."

"If they are ashamed of me, then they are no friends of mine. That's all there is to it." He lit a cigarette.

Michael frowned. "Faugh!" he exclaimed with sudden heat. "I do hate these cigarettes you smoke. They remind me of—well, of things better forgotten."

Dick, who was unaccustomed to an outburst from the imperturbable Michael, broke into a laugh which made him more like the Dick of old. Michael's annoyance vanished, and he pursued evenly the subject that was uppermost in his mind.

"But look here, old fellow, seriously now—do you think it is quite cricket?"

Dick, who had risen and was pacing restlessly up and down, came to a halt and said: "You funny, solemn old ass! What do you mean?"

"I'm not trying to butt in, but as your oldest friend——"

"Oh, get on with it!"

"Well, then, I will. . . . You told me of your hopes once with regard to Miss Favoril. Even if you don't mind for yourself, it is possible that she may mind for you."

"But I tell you I am clearing out of the country. I am fed up with England," Dick repeated, nervously irritable once more.

"She—perhaps she is not."

Dick stared at him in silence. Then: "If a woman cares for a fellow, she is ready to sacrifice all that," he said.

“I daresay, if it is necessary. But is it ? ”

But to this Dick vouchsafed no reply. He threw his half-smoked cigarette into the fire, lit another, and commenced again on his restless pacing of the room—up and down, jerking himself along in nervous lengthy strides.

After making full allowances for the effects of his recent ordeal, the plain fact remained that little could be looked for from Dick in his present mood ; and Michael was being slowly forced to the conclusion that upon himself would rest the task of saving Dick from himself, and that not for Dick's sake alone.

He knew Dick so well, all the gallantry of him, and his self-disregard ; but a further comprehension of his character was being forced upon him now. There was that splendid example of Dick in Court, speaking out at the risk of his life rather than imperilling the honour of a friend. The recollection, too, of his recklessness in the hunting-field, when he would risk unduly the life of a gallant horse, as well as his own. But much as he loved it, a horse was a possession and therefore subject to the same disregard as that to which he might subject himself.

And so it would be with a woman, regarding her as a belonging, like many another man with a cave man's instinct. There are ‘cave-women’ and to spare in the world to-day ; once possessed, they may be labelled with the owner's ticket, and then taken for granted like any other piece of property which it is a felony to steal. But that is ownership ; not equality for either. Nor is it comradeship.

Dick was not selfish. It would be a mistake to regard him as such ; his traits had been handed down to him from a dim age, and he was too easy-going in himself to think ahead. There was in his nature a kindness and a depth of love for his belongings as well as for his friends, only from rather a different standpoint. He would never think of sacrificing a friend.

But Esmée, with all her independence and wit—Esmée a possession ! She was no cave-woman. The thought of it made Michael grit his teeth, and, for the first time in a lifelong friendship, he felt himself waver in his loyalty for Dick. Soon the feeling passed, and the old sense of protectiveness returned to him. Dick, he told himself, was not to be judged on a mere mood, nor was the fine generosity of the man to be forgotten.

Dick had been sharing Michael's chambers during the few days he was spending in town preparatory to his declared intention of an early departure from England. There Bailey joined them one night, and the three friends enjoyed a quiet little dinner at home.

Though still subject to moods, Dick had seemed to be regaining his old happy-go-lucky attitude towards life. But something must have happened during the day to upset him, for a gloomier silence than ever had descended on him, interrupted by a few remarks hinting at a bitterness foreign to his nature. As suddenly all that would change, and he would revert to a boisterous gaiety. Michael kept watching him narrowly, and so did Bailey. And it was to Bailey Dick turned :

"Where does one go when one wants to clear out of England ? You ought to be able to help a fellow, old Bailey, who have travelled up and down the face of the globe."

Bailey hesitated a moment, glancing at Michael. "You mean that, Dick ? That you want to clear out of England—you, who have everything you want, and all that money can buy ? "

A veiled cynicism played about Bailey's lips as he said this. He had a curious contempt for money, or at least for the uneven distribution of wealth ; to that extent there was something of the fanatic about the man. Michael

had always expected to find him developing into a syndicalist after leaving Oxford, instead of which Bailey had contented himself with exploring unusual corners of the earth.

Dick answered with a mirthless laugh: "Everything you want, and all that money can buy, are not always one and the same thing, Bailey. . . . Yes, of course, I mean what I say," he added irritably.

"In that case—what about East Africa? I am going there shortly. You can come along, if you like."

Aware as he was of Dick's proposals, Michael was not prepared for the eagerness with which the suggestion was received. Hitherto he had attributed it largely to a mood; but now, all Dick asked was: How soon could they start?

Bailey drew a small gold cigarette-case from his pocket

"In about two months' time," he replied, tapping his cigarette on the box, then lighting it. There was a dreamy look on his face as he leaned back to watch the smoke, which he exhaled from his thin nostrils, curl in spirals above him and vanish.

"Then I'm your man. I will knock about France and Italy for a bit in the meantime."

"But . . ." Michael stopped. There was that in Dick's eyes which forbade further questioning, though Michael was utterly at a loss to account for the reason of it, and was resolved to investigate later, after Bailey had gone. However, the opportunity never arose, and the answer to the riddle was destined to come from other lips than Dick's.

After dinner they sat round the fire, smoking, the talk ranging many years back as Dick and Bailey recalled old school events, while Michael joined in now and then.

But Michael withdrew more and more from the conversation, and as he sat pulling at his pipe and listening

fitfully to the other two, he gradually became more absorbed in his own thoughts and conscious of nothing save this striving after a mystery, the solution of which had become so vital to the happiness of the two friends whom he loved above all others.

It was a curious state into which he had subsided, that state of concentration when the subconscious mind seems to rise to the surface, and with it all the accumulated perceptions of the past clamouring for recognition. And so an idea was pounding away in his brain, and he kept trying to recollect the association which gave rise to it. If only it would come to him ! . . .

He turned his mind to other things, joining again in conversation with the others, and giving his brain a rest from its wandering.

It was then that it came, like a blinding flash of light out of the darkness. But so sheer an impossibility that it left him aghast. So far-fetched, so wildly improbable—and yet an idea that would not go now that it had found a lodgment in his mind. He shrunk from reasoning his way to so profoundly improbable a conclusion ; but reason was being turned aside for once and wild hazard taking its place.

At first the thought of consulting Kelly occurred to him, but this he thrust from him. He, too, would keep his own counsels, not even taking Esmée into his confidence and involving her in such a phantasy as this.

There came a lull in the conversation. He filled the glasses of his friends before resorting to a good stiff peg himself. But his mind was now made up. He was to act without reasoning, and did not stop to think, for fear that common sense should step in and so divert him from his purpose. He was a hard-headed, clear-seeing man, but intuition had at last got a grip of him, and he was yielding himself up to the thousandth chance.

His pipe had burned out. He sat down and very thoughtfully filled another, his gaze fixed on the dying embers of the fire. Suddenly he began.

"I don't know if you recollect old Jimmy's words on the night of the murder? "

A gloom settled down on the room as he said this. Dick glanced at him sharply, then away, knitting his brows.

"Oh course, Jimmy joked about the mystery of the old house as he joked about most things. But we said we would follow on. . . . You remember, Dick, and you, Bailey? "

Bailey passed his hand over his face once or twice. Then he said: "Haven't we done all we could? "

"That's just it. We have tried everything else; and only this remains. I know it sounds childish, but we promised. Didn't we? Now," said Michael, not waiting for further comment, "you recollect, here was the chair in the alcove." Saying which, he drew from his pocket an envelope, on the back of which he proceeded to make a rough sketch.

Bailey, looking on in silence, began his fidgeting; before he had been perfectly calm. Michael looked up quickly when he had finished his sketch.

"I am only reminding you of this because . . . because each one of us in turn is going to spend a night in that room. And alone, as we said we would; seated in the chair in exactly the same position as it was that night, a revolver in the niche by the alcove. The only question is, who is going to be the first to do it? "

The sound of an indrawn sigh, followed by a silence so intense that almost the beating of man's heart became audible.

"But why? I know we said we would do it, but it was only in jest. What earthly good could it do now? " It was Dick who had interposed.

"Because we promised."

"And why sit up alone?"

"For the same reason—we promised," Michael repeated doggedly. "Oh, I am not mad! I don't suggest it was any supernatural agency which caused Jimmy's death. All the same, it wasn't natural for him to sit down and deliberately do himself to death. You know that, Dick. You, too, Bailey. There was something else to it, and it has got to be discovered."

Dick tried to reason him out of it, but to no purpose. Bailey's lips were working nervously. He said not a word, however, but stood staring into the fire as though fascinated with what he saw there.

If neither of the others agreed to the proposal, Michael announced, then there was nothing more to be said about it. He would take on the job by himself.

Dick looked puzzled. "Not a bit like you, Michael, to get these fancies. It's just your old cussedness that makes you stick to it once you're thwarted. Nothing more."

Bailey turned at last from the fire. "So you've been converted, Frayne," he said, a thin sneer on his lips. "Well, I told you where the mystery lay from the beginning. It is a pity you have not backed me up before. . . . Becoming fanciful at last, are you?"

"Yes, I am."

"Do you admit to me, then, that the old hall has an influence which is not normal?"

"Psychic phenomena are not really in my line, as you know. But yes," Michael admitted slowly, "I suppose I am beginning to be converted."

"Yes," echoed Bailey, a dreamy, rapt expression coming into his face, "there is the borderland. I have crossed it myself, once or twice. . . . There is something abnormal about that room. Looking into its shadows,

I have had the odd impression that something was forming there before my very eyes. You cannot keep your mind from it. Once you've experienced it, it draws you like a magnet."

Bailey spoke as though he were communing with himself all the time.

Michael nodded. For a strong-nerved man, his reply was a strange one: "That is it. Something forming in the shadows which makes a man turn faint with the evil of it."

Bailey assented, brushing his hand across his eyes as though wakening from a dream. "One can never get away from it—never forget," he said.

Dick looked from one to the other and tried to laugh it off. "If you fellows take to this sort of thing seriously," he said, "you'll go off your heads, both of you. *You*, Michael, of all people! What has come to you?"

But Michael was quite immovable to ridicule. He repeated: "We've got to follow on, one after the other, until we pluck the heart out of this mystery. There is no rest for us until we do."

Another silence ensued. It was broken again by Bailey:

"Well, if you put it that way, Frayne, the only question is—who is to be the first?"

"It's all damn nonsense! But if we are mad enough for that, then it's up to me," Dick broke in.

"No, we shall toss for it," Michael said this so resolutely, glancing from one to the other, that neither contradicted him. Bailey's face was very pale, and there was a curiously mottled look about it; Dick's was wryly smiling.

Michael pulled a handful of small coins from his pocket and selected one. "Odd man out. Do you fellows agree to that? If not, then I go alone."

Dick watched him a moment more. "Let us toss, then," he said after a pause.

Bailey rose from his chair. He stood, pale and tense, with every nerve in his body on the twitter. "Very well," he agreed.

The three coins went spinning into the air.

"Heads!" Dick was the first to show his hand.

But Bailey uncovered his slowly; his teeth were so tightly clenched as he did so that the strained muscles of his face quivered, and the jaw stood out sharply from the skin. He darted a look at the coin he held in his hand, then breathed in almost a whisper:

"Heads!"

"Tails!" said Michael a moment after.

A dead silence, then a sigh smothered in its birth.

"You, Frayne," cried Bailey, his eyes glittering. "My God, have you no feeling about it?"

"It is nothing," Michael answered in firm, level tones. He very coolly picked up a desk diary and turned over the pages. "Let me see, I can manage it best on Thursday. There will be a moon, I see, and I'll chance it being a clear night. I shall start at ten and sit up till the morning. The conservatory will be open—everything just as it was on the night of the murder."

Dick came up to him, laying a hand on his friend's shoulder. "No, old fellow," he urged, "it's not worth it. There can be no danger. But God knows there has been tragedy enough in the old house without tempting it further. Its associations are enough to turn a man's mind. . . . Don't you do it, Michael. Or, if you must, then let me come too."

"You don't understand, Dick. It seems mad of me, I daresay. But I've thought of it and thought until, at times, I can almost hear old Jimmy's voice, 'You'll follow on, eh?' . . . Well, I am going to follow on."

Dick turned on his heel and walked slowly to the fireplace, and a flame leaped up, dyeing his hand a faint red

As he turned again there was an odd expression on his face. He sighed.

“I know why you are doing it. But you also—do not understand,” he observed.

“Anyhow, I’ve won the toss,” said Michael, not understanding the other’s meaning till later. “And I am going alone. Mind you don’t interfere with me, either of you.”

“Very well, have your way of it. But,” and Bailey shook his head grimly, “you have never made a study of these things, Frayne. I think you will have to leave it to me yet.”

CHAPTER XXXI

THUS it happened that Michael found himself once more in Marley Pryors, on his way to the fatal house, alone.

With the exception of Dick and Bailey, no one knew of the vigil he had imposed upon himself. It had been agreed among them that the matter should be kept a rigid secret, this being the course which Michael had insisted on, who was journalist enough to fear the prominence it might otherwise receive in the newspapers still anxious to pander to the unsated curiosity of the public with regard to the mystery which had occupied its attention for months past.

He motored down on the date fixed, arriving as dusk was drawing in, and taking up his quarters at the Marley Arms. It was a mild February evening, sweet with the incredible fragrance of spring. He opened his window and leaned out, drawing in great mouthfuls of air; it was good, this quiet clean peace of the country, after the racket and smoke of a great city.

The birds were already stirring about their business. A blackbird opened its golden beak to sing; but it took fright at something, and sped, shrieking from its perch on a great chestnut tree into the heart of a hawthorn hedge, there to lose itself.

Across the village green the cottages were beginning to light up, one by one. The spire of an ancient church dreamed in the haze, and grew dim. Beyond, and nestling in the shadows of the trees, lay the darker mass of the

vicarage. And as he gazed, a light sprang up in one of its windows ; then another. Michael wondered if Esmée were at home, and he smiled to himself—a little sadly, it may be—as he thought of the secret laughter in a girl's eyes, in the days that were gone. Presently, when it grew quite dark, he would go for a stroll, where there should be no chance of meeting her. After that, dinner ; and then . . .

But in the meantime, he was content to stand at the open window, in the twilight, leaving the rest to chance, which he felt was taking a hand in his affairs of the moment. He refilled his pipe, ramming the tobacco well into place. and with a critical nicety, before lighting it.

“Michael ! ”

The lighted match was arrested in mid-air. The flame ran down the wood and burned his fingers ; he knew then he was not asleep.

“Mickey ! ” More insistent this time. Much.

And there, her eyes screwed up into a smiling surprise and face upturned, stood no less a person than little Esmée herself, returning from a walk with Bill, the fox-terrier.

“Come down at once. What are you doing here ? ”

“All right.. Coming.”

“Damn ! ” he muttered to himself ; and repeated it with emphasis as he clattered down the old inn staircase, This was greatly complicating matters ; he would have to render some account of himself now. Albeit, the frown was not having it all its own way as he went out to meet her.

She slid her arm through his in the dark, as they walked on, and said : “What's brought you here ? And why didn't you tell me you were coming ? ”

“Nothing much to tell. The fact is, I came down—just to see how everything was going on.” He was not finding the explanation an easy one.”

"Really!" The smile had begun in her eyes. "I thought you had come down to see—dad, perhaps. You know you made an impression on him with your remarks on frescoes—or was it mosaics?"

The smile had reached her lips now—Michael was infecting her, as often before, with the humour of talking nonsense.

"He often refers to your—well, original theories, he calls them, and wishes to question you further. And yet," she said, pouting a little, "it was 'things' you came to see, after all. Dad *will* be disappointed! . . . Never mind, you shall come to us for dinner, anyhow."

"I am afraid——"

"I refuse to accept that," she broke in.

Michael smiled grimly. He was sorry, he murmured; some other time. . . . But she would have none of it.

As they reached the gate he turned round on her, and said very firmly: "Look here, Esmée, you must be a pal, and excuse me to-night. I have got an—appointment; it may turn out to be important."

"More of the mystery? How lovely!" She caught hold of the lapel of his coat, giving excited little tugs at it, as she spoke. "Tell me just everything. At once, Michael."

And he passed after her into the starlit garden.

She came to a standstill at a bend in the avenue. Bill, the dog, looked up at her, sighed, and sat down. The interruption was not to his liking; he did not understand it. Besides, it was getting on for dinner-time; he wanted to be back for that. But Esmée was not considering his feelings.

"Now tell me. . . . Tell me."

He faced her, knitting his brows. Now that he was going to do her a service, it seemed as if he had been waiting a long time for this. The moment had come;

beyond that was the blank he dared not yet contemplate. And all he could say was :

“I shall tell you to-morrow.”

Her hands trembled a little, then fell to her side. “You don’t trust me—after all we have been through together ? Oh, Mickey, you don’t trust me ! ”

“It is not so. You know that very well.” He spoke gruffly ; it was being so much more difficult than he had found anything in his life before.

“Then why won’t you tell me what it is ? I might be able to help. . . .”

It was a wistful appeal for recognition of their partnership. That, and nothing more, he assured himself. But he stared resolutely over her head, as he answered :

“Not now.”

“Me, Mickey ? Not tell me ? ” And the softness of her voice fell on him as a caress.

She remained perfectly still for a moment, as if she did not mean to move or to speak again. She hurt him with her nearness. The breeze blew cool against his cheek. It fluttered her skirt against him. He started back ; moved aside. . . .

“What is it ? ” she questioned in a low voice.

“Nothing.”

She eyed him curiously, critically ; then a look of resolution swept into her face. “I am coming with you. Do you hear me ? ” and she caught at his arm, as if to shake him out of his mute immobility. “I am coming with you. There is danger, I know—and so I am coming.”

Still he refused to meet her gaze. “It is impossible.” He spoke at last, dully.

“How do we know what is possible—you and I ? ” she breathed. “Must we always fight against the inevitable ? ”

Those violet eyes clinging to his had a supplication in them. ‘Ah, we cannot !’ they entreated as no words could have done.

The night was vibrant with her whisper. She waited, turning her head away into the darkness. A stillness fell between them.

Then he looked at her swiftly, and in a sort of trembling wonder; and she met his gaze. How differently she looked, he thought. A subtle change had come over her face it seemed to have borrowed some of the soft mystery of the night; the violet eyes had grown inscrutable as the stars.

He knew then that her love was for him. The knowledge of it came as a blinding flash: it stunned him. But with a tremendous effort of will he forced the situation back upon itself, and said, speaking harshly:

"There is no danger. I do not want to have anyone with me." And he added: "That is all."

'It will be easier thus,' he thought. But—at what a cost! A bleak look had come into his face as he turned away from her.

She shrank back, regarding him with lowered lids as if she wondered who he was—this sudden stranger. A tinge of red had crept into her face.

"You mean that?" she asked in a small choked voice. She waited, but he could not trust himself to speak.

"You do not want me, then? . . . Is that it?"

She bit her lips to keep back the tears. She swayed the way he had seen men do when they were wounded. Then pride came to her rescue. She must go on brightly smiling; he must never know . . .

"I—cannot," he faltered. He spoke despairingly; the sacrifice was a far bigger thing than he had ever imagined. And listening, she began to understand.

The vicarage was wrapped in sombre shadow; but the church spire, thrusting upwards, was edged in silver. The moon rose further, and wrought its magic tracery on the trees. Higher still, it flooded the vicarage roof with a sort of halo; suddenly it fell full upon the girl's face. It

revealed the startling pallor of her cheeks, the glimmer of unshed tears; and somehow she looked so small, and tired and lonely.

Several times her lips moved in an attempt to speak.

"Ah," she said at last, in a whisper, "we are neither of us so small as to hide from each other the—the big thing."

She slipped her hand into his, where it lay very warm and soft within his grasp, with a queer little fluttering of her fingers.

"I've found the secret of your—your air of conquest at last," she continued bravely. "It is that you are so completely master of yourself. . . . I too must learn it, mustn't I, Mickey?"

"There is Dick," he answered simply; "he has come through so much already."

"Yes, there is Dick," she breathed, and he saw the colour fade from her cheeks. "I—I understand it better now. You have shown me the way."

And for a point of honour, a man and a woman were condemning each other to eat their hearts out, and none would be any the better or any the happier for it.

"But ah! it was all my fault. You must never blame yourself—never! I could never bear that. I thought . . . You see, no woman had ever come into your life before. I tried to show you—" she gave a wry little smile; "that was in the beginning. But it is you who have conquered me in the end, Michael. And now—it is you have shown me the way."

She drew a pace closer to him.

"Michael! . . ." she whispered in that golden voice that was a mystery of softness.

She clung to him for a moment, passionately sobbing. All at once she was her calm, sweet self again.

"Now go. . . ." She turned swiftly and glided from him in the darkness.

CHAPTER XXXII

HER going was followed by a profound sadness that filled the whole universe. Michael stood like a graven statue, staring up the dim avenue.

She had vanished like a dream that goes with waking. Another light had sprung up in the vicarage ; it glittered through the trees and mocked him. He was trying to remember her features, to imprint each one of them ineffaceably on his mind as of one whom he should never see again. But the years flew past him, as it seemed, leaving him only with that vague image which Time bequeaths. And the sole memory left him was that of a pale, sweet face held up to him under the stars, and the pools of wistful shadows which were her eyes.

Once he had almost called out to her ; once the instinct to run up the drive after her had almost overcome him. Before it was too late. . . .

Too late for what ? It was this which pulled him up to face the truth of it. No, it would not do, and there was an end to it. He had to stick it out. There was the plain task before him to which he had set himself ; and there was his plain loyalty to Dick. Better the friendship to fade which could be no more a friendship. Soon he would pass, a dim regretted wraith, from her life.

Yes, it was all quite plain before him now. Life was a simple enough thing, if only people took it so : certain definite laws of cause and effect to be recognised and submitted to, for happiness to come of it in the end, and the disregard of which could end only in remorse. There was a single-mindedness about Michael above the ordinary :

no hesitation over issues, as in the case of a more complex nature.

He was quite unconscious of any self-sacrifice in the matter; in fact, such an idea never entered his head. Honour forbade that he should take advantage of a friend's absence—Dick's, of all people. It was a thought which simply did not find a lodgment in his brain.

As he roused himself and set out to retrace his steps, a spirit of exultation came upon him. He had given up so much, there was nothing left for Fate to rob him of.

Once he halted and looked back. The moon floated high over the garden now—her garden. Little fleecy clouds trailed their laughing shadows over the tree-fringed lawns. All so ineffably peaceful and secure.

A moment he stood, drinking it all in and trying to gather to himself something of the night's great calm. Then he turned sharply, and went his way.

Dinner over, Michael completed his few simple preparations. Revolver, lantern, flask and a small hand mirror; these, and a warm overcoat, for the night would be cold in the dank old hall without a fire. Then he lit his pipe, and was ready.

How sweet and wholesome the village looked in the moonlight as he set out on foot! And the lights of the vicarage—he looked only once in that direction, then kept his gaze fixed resolutely before him.

As he walked over the well-remembered road, his mind was besieged by questions. With the thought of the old house looming up before him, it seemed sane enough now to regard his theory as a possibility; it was only in the cold light of day that it seemed too purely fanciful for serious consideration. He had wakened in the morning with the assurance that it was beyond the limits of the conceivable, but as night fell that same credulity crept

back to him again. What should the morning's view prove the correct one? But committed to action, as he was now, he was man enough to thrust all thoughts of failure from him.

He did not exaggerate the horror of what he had set himself to do; neither did he minimise it. It was a 'simple service simply given' for those whom he accounted of more worth than himself in the scheme of things. Yet he felt himself walking out to meet the shadow of a dream which had been hanging over him a long time.

A soft white cloud was creeping over the sky, and a dim star showed here and there. Michael had been walking for upwards of half an hour when he came to the lodge gates, and passed within the gloom of the avenue. A chill wind was blowing in his face as he advanced. It died down as suddenly as it had risen, and everything grew deadly still; a footfall made no sound on the old neglected roadway, overgrown with grass and weeds as it was. He whistled to himself to keep up his spirits, but somehow it only served to accentuate the unnatural silence of the night.

Presently the old house towered its dark mass in front of him, effaced in the mystery of the night, yet stretching out a deadly hand to gather in. The 'Spider's Web' Esmée had aptly called it. As he emerged from the avenue to the terrace in front, the cloud had rolled slowly from the face of the moon, releasing its flood of cold, clear light upon the building.

He hesitated—but only for a moment, like a man standing on the brink of his destiny. He had the feeling that here at last and now were to be learned things he was destined to know from the commencement. It was the hour of his fate; he was capable of contemplating it with a calm audacity, confident as ever in his own strength to grapple with circumstance. The issue when it did

come would be plain enough ; he could wait, and was content to leave it at that. Imaginative he certainly was not, but there was a sort of veiled fatalism such as exists in men of a like simplicity of character.

A moment he stood, then crossed the pool of moonlight ; round by the old wing, through the conservatory door, which he left ajar, and into the house of limitless shadows, where the world of hope seemed dead. Thus he entered upon a night vigil, one which he was destined never to forget.

Michael opened the great bay window and looked out. How noiseless the world was ; all at rest save for the few white clouds which drifted over the sky, throwing their ghostly shadows about the lawns and terraces as they flitted across the moon.

As his eye travelled down the long black vault of the avenue—the road by which he should pass out when his work was done—he gave a little involuntary shiver. Suddenly he turned to cast an anxious, peering glance behind him. Nothing there ; but in spite of all his native calm, the stillness and the black decay of his surroundings were working on him. It was as if his resolution was being snapped slowly away from him, and his sense of mastery going from him.

And always that hush over everything. From outside came the occasional cry of a night-bird. Somewhere in the distance a dog bayed—remote, unearthly sound here, and in the waning moonlight ; sounds which made the silence of the house more vibrant than before. Far off he could hear, faintly borne on the breeze, the tones of the old parish clock tolling the hour. Ten o'clock struck, then the quarter.

He heard it strike the half-hour before he closed the window, letting the old mouldering curtains fall back into

place again, but leaving room enough for the moon to enter as it might.

He stifled a sigh as he turned from the window. 'You don't want me, then?' It was the echo of that whisper which kept stabbing into Michael's heart now. Want her! He uttered a sad little laugh at the greatness of his need. How white her face had looked in the starlight! And then her eyes—was the suffering in them still? She was such a child, the pain would cease, he thought. But for him—well, there was to-night. . . .

And to-night was come to solve it all; odd how the thought of that kept haunting him. So he crushed the memory of a woman from him; and as he moved away from the window the gloom of the hall settled about him once more.

He stole back to the alcove, walking on tip-toe as though in fear of recalling a shadowy something from its grave. The ghost of a smile came into his face as he moved the fatal chair silently into position and sat himself down upon it. He stood the small lantern on the ground beside him, shutting down the shade which masked its light; then he drew the revolver from his pocket, and set it on his knee, ready for instant use. At last his preparations were completed. Nothing to do now but wait, and he settled down to it in the silent darkness.

Once or twice he whipped round and peered into the thickening gloom, feeling as it were, his every movement spied upon by unseen eyes. He was conscious of a strained alertness, listening for unheard sounds, and always on the outlook for shadowy movements which never took on definite shape or form. The intense silence was full of hidden life; the panelling creaked; curtains whispered one to the other.

For once he was beset by strange imaginings—undefined, absurd, inexplicable. Something was mounting

the stairs. Now it was in the room, stealing up behind him. Strong-nerved as he was, he became slowly overstrung. Once he jumped up, against his will, to dart round the corner of the alcove and pull the portière aside. But the passage was empty; nothing there save the darkness—but a darkness so full of expectancy as to become a veil for some unthinkable horror.

Back to his chair, ashamed of his passing weakness and resolved not to move again until the mystery of the night should be accomplished. Time wore on. He looked at his watch and found it was eleven o'clock. Hours later, it seemed, when he looked again it was a quarter past. But his quietude was returning to him, a sort of frozen, deadly calm.

The night was growing colder. He wrapped his coat more closely about him and waited.

Of a sudden, a faint breath of air stole into the room, a cold, dank air as from a vault; a moment, and it was gone. For a time, nothing. Was it fancy, or was something stealing up the stairs? . . .

Ah! There it was again—the sound that turned his blood to ice, the same thudding softness he had listened to before with Kelly. And with that, his sense of hearing became abnormally acute.

Followed a muffled, ghastly tread—almost inaudible—mounting the stair, pausing at every step. Then mounting up. Up; and further, up. . . .

Michael's breathing quickened; he was aware of the heavy pounding of his heart. His hand slipped round the revolver, the index finger quivering a little as it felt for the trigger-guard. He sat quite still in the moonlight, except for the hand which manipulated the small mirror in front of him, twisting it about at different angles in order to catch a glimpse of any movement from behind. But the old hall was wrapped again in its ghastly silence.

A moment passed ; two. The longing to call out became intense. It grew intolerable.

He had known the fear men felt in France. But for the first time in his life he sensed non-physical fear—that terror of the intangible which is buried deep in a man's being from the dim beginnings of time. He took a fresh grip of things as he waited, arguing with himself in his resolute way that it was only a physical agency which menaced him, and of that he knew no fear. But there was always that great 'perhaps' to slowly wear away his strength so that he could endure the silence not a moment more.

"Who's there?" . . . As in a dream, he seemed to hear the whispered echo of his own despair, though not a word had passed his lips.

A pause ; then a faint scratching sound, followed by a tremor of the curtain.

The time had come. Action, with all its simplicity, was upon him ; and with it, too, a firm control of himself. Softly, very, very gently, he drew his revolver until it pointed at the corner of the alcove, to the height of a man's chest. His eyes grew fierce and ready. His muscles tightened as he sat, tense as an animal about to spring. The unknown terror was forgotten in the surging joy at the feel of his strength. There was but one question now. . . .

But before he could rise, the answer had come, leaping out at him from the shadows. Something was coiling about him, and, tightening, had pinioned him to the chair. The revolver, knocked from his hands, fell with a clatter on the stone floor. The rope, drawn tighter, was biting into the muscles of his arms and rendering them useless. Straining at his bonds and getting his head half round, he saw a hand suddenly flash from the darkness into the moonlight, where it floated, clenching its fingers in mid-air.

Next moment a shadow rounded the corner of the wall, moving silently into view.

CHAPTER XXXIII

As has already been stated, Kelly had a perfect belief in the value of trifles. Once he had eliminated all the major possibilities of a case and was left only with the minor, be it never such a trifle, he would concentrate all his energies on that with dogged cheerfulness.

He was a man, too, who extracted humour from the lesser things of life to a greater degree than most. But touch him on the point of professional procedure, and he rolled up into a ball like a hedgehog, with all its prickles out.

The mystery of Marley baffled him. He had always the feeling that the clue lay well within his reach if only he could grasp it, but it kept eluding him in a way that made the little man grind his teeth and persevere. Then, too, while he had lost his rancour, his professional pride still smarted when he reflected on the later dealings he had had with Frayne ; and so, with a stiff upper lip and a silent tongue in his head, he kept to the task before him with a great tenacity.

He had set a watch on Miss di Conti's lodging-place, whence certain clues had radiated—suggestions, rather, which he had followed up with meticulous care ; and all of these had led him nowhere. But still he watched.

Then suddenly the girl had left her rooms in Bright Street ; and when he had applied to the fat Neapolitan for information, he had been met with a profession of ignorance which had fast developed into surliness on a further pursuance of his questions—questions thrown out at a

venture by Kelly, who knew very well whither the girl had transferred her quarters, a close watch having been maintained on her movements. The Italian's answers had confirmed Kelly in his suspicions, and the fact that the truth was now being concealed was a clear indication that the Italian had been primed to it. But to what end? And by whom? There, again, was the blank wall which arrested further progress. Still, it encouraged the detective—or, as he would have you call him, the investigator—to devote his time and thought to the case; and in these days he was seldom seen outside his haunts in Soho.

M'Kerrel dropped in one night at a certain Florentine restaurant and found Kelly at dinner.

"What!" he queried. "All alone, Kelly?" And he sat down in the vacant chair.

Kelly nodded and grinned, his mouth full of spaghetti and tomato sauce, a large plateful of which he was consuming with remarkable despatch. But all his movements exceeded the time-limit, of the brain as of the body; and for a small man his capacity was equally noteworthy.

There was a bulky leather note-book, black and shining with age, on the table beside him as he ate, which he consulted or on which he jotted notes in a microscopic hand between the courses. He was not a man to waste a moment of the day.

So as M'Kerrel caught sight of the note-book, his rugged old face creased into a smile. "Aye!" he said. "And you'll still be struggling with the Marley case?"

"Yep. Just been going over a few notes on the subject."

The waiter having come to remove the last dish on which Kelly had been engaged, the note-book was opened for M'Kerrel's inspection, disclosing certain hand sketches made in Marley House, each one of them a model of neatness and precision.

"Here, Mac, are the three bedrooms," he explained, further demonstrating their juxtaposition with the aid of the coffee spoon and salt-cellar. "Frayne occupied this one; Bailey the next to him; while the one on the other side of the passage was occupied by young Marley. The windows of the first two open on to a sort of balcony which runs round the gable of the house to the old wing, where it ends abruptly. . . . You'll remember it?"

M'Kerrel nodded his head in confirmation and waited for the other to continue.

"Well," said Kelly, "the drop from the balcony to the ground is some twenty feet, more or less; but there is a lot of old ivy growing up the wall there. Did you ever notice anything about that ivy, M'Kerrel?"

M'Kerrel peered at him from under his white, bushy eyebrows. "No," he said, "I did not."

"Well, I did. There was a small strand loosened from the wall."

"There had been a gale the night before. Do you mean——?"

"I mean that it may have been the storm; or, again, it may not. I've been thinking a lot about it lately, and one of these days I'll be taking a run down to have a closer look at things for myself—without a word of it, either, to Mr. Michael Frayne."

"Surely——" the other broke in, and was again interrupted.

"No, it's not him I'm thinking of."

"Who else, then?"

Kelly shot a keen glance at his old friend. "I'm keeping my mouth tight shut these days," he observed, shutting up his pocket-book with a snap and replacing it in his pocket.

M'Kerrel took a pull on his cigar, and said: "It has always seemed to me that the crime is one of two kinds:

either it is the carefully co-ordinated and elaborated cunning of a group of criminals, or it is the act of a maniac. There is the same devilish ingenuity about either, as a rule."

For a while after that they chatted of other things, mostly 'shop.' M'Kerrel had been talking of a matter which was of particular interest to Kelly, when, suddenly, he became aware that his friend's attention was directed on something at the further end of the room ; and following the direction of his gaze, he noticed a very pretty dark girl, with a Madonna-like face and plainly dressed, followed by a tall slim man whose clothes suggested Savile Row. The man's back was turned to them, but something about the figure was vaguely familiar to M'Kerrel's trained eye.

"That's Bailey," he remarked tentatively, as the object of his scrutiny seated himself at a table, his back still turned and without apparently noticing them.

Kelly did not answer. He had become oblivious to M'Kerrel's presence, but his eyes were bright and keen, and they seemed always to be watching.

"Pretty girl he's got with him, too. Looks foreign. . . . Do you know who she is, Kelly ? "

Still no answer.

Kelly's mind was working rapidly. The central fact round which his thoughts revolved was this : that Bailey should be a friend of Miss di Conti's. Next, it struck him that Bailey was probably in the habit of frequenting this restaurant, one which he had not entered himself for years, as being somewhat outside the radius of his customary Soho resorts. The manager was standing by the table, talking to Bailey—a fact which had given rise to Kelly's deduction.

"Seen anything of Frayne lately ? " M'Kerrel inquired.

"Eh . . . What's that ! Frayne ? No."

"Well, he called round on me this afternoon. He

seemed to have something on his mind—something in connection with the Marley case. I thought perhaps you might be in his confidence—— ”

“No, I’m not,” Kelly broke in shortly. Did he mention my name at all? ”

“He left a sealed letter which he asked me to give to you, should he not call for it himself within three days.”

Kelly’s interest was caught at that. He questioned M’Kerrel but could obtain no further information, for M’Kerrel himself could not account for Frayne’s sudden reticence, and thought it strange.

Kelly’s face was wrinkled up. Suddenly it cleared, and, beckoning to the waiter, he demanded his bill in a hurry.

“You seem to have solved something. What’s the answer? ”

Kelly grinned. “The answer,” said he, “is the proverbial lemon. But it is a funny thing, Mac, and I’ve often noticed it before—— ”

“Well? ”

“You happen to think of a—a lemon, say—and it appears. Good-night.” And he was off.

The first thing Kelly did was to make arrangements to have Bailey’s further movements watched. His inclination then was to call on Frayne, and gain what information he could without communicating what was in his own mind. But here he wavered, and, what was still less usual with him, he hesitated. He had half a mind to return to M’Kerrel, and, putting the whole case before him, to have the benefit of his hard-bitten experience to bear upon so delicate a tissue of theories as this. But it was the barest hypothesis on which he was working, and one which he himself would have ridiculed as being motiveless and absurd, did it not happen to be the only one left. He could hear M’Kerrel’s dry chuckle, and could picture the

pawky fun which would be poked at him, should he venture upon it.

No, he decided, he would not show his hand to anyone until there was something less abstract to go upon. In the morning he would look up Frayne to see what could be gathered from him; more than this would be superfluous. He would leave it until the morning—absurd to think of doing anything in a hurry; and besides, he was a strong believer in the soundness of the morning's counsel, having had cause before this to regret impulsive decisions of the night before. He was a man who feared his own impulses—and sometimes with reason.

Morning came, and he got into communication with Frayne on the telephone.

"Hullo. . . . Kelly speaking. . . . Is that you, Mr. Frayne? . . . Yes, it's Kelly. I should like to come round and see you this evening and have a chat, if you have an hour to spare. . . . Yes, about the Marley case. Nothing of importance; only a few questions I should like to ask you. What's that? . . . Going out of town, are you? Perhaps we could meet to-morrow, then. . . . What? . . . You will let me know as soon as you return? Very well. . . . Yes? . . . Yes, that's all. Motoring, did you say? . . . I see. Good-bye."

Well, he thought, as he laid down the receiver, he had established this much: Frayne was going out of town. He had been careful not to say where he was going; and yet he had left a sealed envelope with M'Kerrel—plainly something connected with his going, and something of vital importance, too. Could he be going to Marley Pryors? It seemed a fairly reasonable supposition; apart from the Marley mystery, there was another attraction there. And Kelly chuckled to himself.

It was the evening before the first report of Bailey's movements reached Kelly. Bailey, he was informed, had been

shadowed to Charing Cross, where he had taken a ticket to Marley by a slow train. The informant had been given no instructions to track Bailey out of London ; and having discovered all he could, had telephoned results and was now awaiting further orders.

Kelly's mind was made up in an instant. While blaming himself for limiting his agent's discretionary powers, he looked up the time-table. Not much consolation to be gained there for anyone in a hurry. Marley was an unimportant station ; only a few slow trains stopped there ; the first he could now catch was one which did not leave until eight-o'clock, and which arrived at midnight.

This was no good to Kelly, who wanted to get there—as he wanted to get most things in life—in a hurry, especially a thing which baffled his comprehension so completely as this did. Dipping more deeply into his Bradshaw, he found there was a junction twenty miles distant, at which all express trains stopped, and that there was a train, starting in twenty minutes. He might not manage it, but he could try. So off he put, and as luck would have it, encountered a passing taxi.

He found his agent waiting at the station entrance, and telling him to telegraph for a motor to await him at the junction, he ran for it, reaching the platform just in time to board the nearest carriage as the train was steaming out.

“Phew !” he exclaimed, mopping his brow, “that was a near thing !”

He had the compartment to himself. Time now to do a bit of thinking. But the more he thought the more puzzled did he grow. To tell the truth, he was not at all sure in his own mind why he should have come himself instead of deputing his agent, except that he was acting on impulse, after all. And he was still less certain what precisely he would do when he got there, unless he could arrive at a clearer conception of the facts in the meantime.

“ Kelly, my boy, you’ve let yourself go again,” he thought to himself.

He leaned back watching the landscape fly past, and trying to connect in his mind the simultaneous convergence of Frayne and Bailey on Marley Pryors. For Frayne must have gone to Marley ; somehow Kelly had no more doubt of that in his mind.

Frayne was motoring out of town, and he usually motored when he went to Marley. Motoring, was he ? Then why had he not taken Bailey with him instead of leaving his friend to travel down by a slow train ?

Obviously because Frayne did not know that Bailey was going. So this could not be an appointment between the two friends. What could it be, then—merely a coincidence ?

Here his imagination began to outpace reason, and to paint the beginnings of a picture on his mind. He felt he had groped his way to the root of the matter ; all it wanted was a hint to set him on the right direction from the start.

The train had gathered up speed. It dashed, shrieking, into a tunnel and enveloped Kelly in a sudden darkness. When it emerged into the light again, an answer flashed into Kelly’s mind which took his breath away with its sheer unexpectedness, and the end of which he could not see.

What could have led Frayne to the same suspicion was beyond Kelly’s imagination to grasp ; but that it must be so, was the only theory which could be made to fit in with all the aspects of the riddle. And as the train sped on, there fell upon him—as had fallen upon Frayne before him—that sense of things impending which must culminate at last.

The motor was waiting at the junction ; nothing to delay him there. He glanced at his watch, and found it was ten o’clock. He should be able to get to Marley within

the hour ; a puncture held him up, however, and the parish clock had struck the quarter past eleven as he stepped from the car into the Marley Arms.

Yes, the proprietor stated, Mr. Frayne was putting up at the inn ; but he had gone out after dinner—where, was not clear, but the suggestion offered was that he may have paid a visit to the vicarage.

Curious the threads by which human destinies hang. Esmée had gone up to her den and was writing a letter to Dick withdrawing her refusal. She was on the point of committing herself to the irrevocable, for she was very young, and youth is deliberately destructive when, in its despairing moods and bitterness, it sets a seal to the book of Fate.

She had finished off her letter, written and torn up and then re-written. Neither the ink, nor her tears, were dry when she heard a motor hum past, then pull up and back its way to the gate of the vicarage. Her heart beat faster as she opened her door and peered out ; it began to race when she heard a man's voice—not Michael's, but Kelly's—converse in low tones with her father. Then she moved down a few steps, and silently, to lean over the banister and listen. What she heard was not much, but it was enough to make up her mind for her. Darting back to her room, she slipped into a warm coat, and fastened a veil over her head. A moment she paused by the writing-table ; then, driven by some blind caprice, she snatched up the letter which had cost her tears to write, and tore it into a hundred tiny fragments with vicious little jerks of her fingers.

Down she fled by a back stair, and into the garden.

CHAPTER XXXIV

DISCUSSING it months afterwards with M'Kerrel, I put it to him straight: Did he not think an imaginative mind, knowing what Michael knew, might have leaped to a conclusion long ago? And here I told him of the cigarette, and Michael's suppression of his find. ('Just as well,' said M'Kerrel. 'It would have hanged the lad Dick, I feel sure.')

But as to the other, M'Kerrel shook his head and looked wise; and, pressed to answer: 'Where could it have led him, then?' he queried. "Michael has the intuitive faculty; but that sound, reasoning mind of his had no motive to start deducing from in the beginning."

As for Bailey, the facts of his character are really so extraordinary, that, being no metaphysician, I do not attempt to do justice to them, but leave the facts I write of to speak for themselves. This is how I try to account for it to myself. Some latent film of madness in Bailey's mind, sensitised by the suggestive influence pervading the atmosphere of the so-called 'Room of Death,' and which suspended his sanity—for the time being, at all events. Or, in terms of sound, it may be likened to the reproduction of a tune on a record, given the gramophone and the needle.

But there, I leave it at that, and hasten to the end, which is not far distant, returning to the point where we had left Michael bound to the fatal chair.

A face crossed the streak of moonlight. Then a voice said softly:

“You were expecting me, Frayne. Well, here I am.”

Michael's superior strength was swiftly at a discount by reason of the rope round his arms. Next, his legs and hands pinioned, he sat perfectly still and silent, his eyes fixed steadily, dauntlessly, on Bailey's. Thus was a dream come true, the dream that had haunted him.

Bailey flashed open the dark lantern and walked with it in his hand round the chair, examining the knots and inserting pads where the rope would otherwise have marked the flesh. Then he came to a halt, facing his victim, with something of a smile quivering on his thin lips.

“Now,” he said, “I've got you.” He stood for a moment mopping his brow with his handkerchief and fighting with his emotion. “Why don't you speak, Frayne? I am not going to gag you; there is no need of that.”

“What the devil do you mean by this joke?” Michael demanded. But he knew as he spoke that he was at the mercy of a maniac; for in Bailey's eyes was written the one word ‘death.’

“Joke, Frayne? . . . Yes, it is a joke,” and Bailey hugged himself as if enjoying the jest immensely. “I always said you would find the solution here. And to-night you will solve the greatest problem of all. . . . But there, I see you follow me—‘Suicide whilst temporarily insane’; a comfortable fiction. You see the point, my friend?”

Something so sinister shone out of the mad eyes peering into his that Michael involuntarily glanced aside.

“Oh, it is very pretty!” and Bailey gloated over his ingenuity in his madman's way.

But Michael, knowing of the letter he had left for Kelly, said nothing.

Bailey continued: “What I want to know is this: How did you come to suspect me at all? You were always a

fool, Frayne, but you nearly hoodwinked me, all the same I thought you were in earnest till we tossed ; then I saw you fake the coin so that you should be odd man out. Well," and he shook with silent laughter, "you were the odd man, and soon you will be out. But how did you come to guess—merely as a matter of curiosity? "

Michael did not answer at once ; and when he did, he spoke very slowly, very thoughtfully : "There were the two half-smoked cigarettes which I found in the shrubbery. I thought Dick was the only one who smoked them until the other night when you and he dined with me. That started me thinking. Now," he added, "I have told you my side of the story. There are just a few things I should like to ask you before—I go out."

His quiet mastery was detaching his mind from his own peril ; he knew only a questioning curiosity as yet. Bailey nodded, moistening his lips with his tongue ; and the other continued calmly to put his questions :

"Do you mean to say, Bailey, you would have left Dick to swing for the Marley murder—if it had come to that? "

"Not much chance of it. . . . No, I did not want him to meet with such a death. But he is a man and can die—we have seen plenty of men die in France, you and I, Frayne—while Miss di Conti is a woman ; it is her life against Dick's—after you have gone."

Then he went on to explain in his gentle voice : "There are only two people between her and her rights ; without the means of support and comfort she will certainly die. The fogs of London are slowly killing her as it is. Without money she will die, I tell you. . . . And each day I see her growing weaker. Proud and suspicious of charity, she will accept nothing but her rights. . . . Well, I am getting them for her. There is yourself, Frayne ; and after to-night there is only Dick. . . ."

A dreamy softness had come into his eyes, but they hardened again as he continued :

“Ah, you have searched and you have tried in your plodding, thick-headed way, and you have found me. Now, since you ask it, you are going to hear it all before you go. . . . For I’ve got you, Frayne ; I’ve got you——”

“As you got poor Jimmy.”

“As I got poor Jimmy,” Bailey echoed.

Suddenly he leaned forward until his face almost touched Michael’s, and his dark, brooding eyes lighted up with a mad enthusiasm as he muttered :

“I’ve watched men die. I have peered into their eyes as I’m peering into yours now. . . . There is the fear of death first, no matter how hard they try to hide it—not physical, Frayne, but fear of the darkness.”

He sunk his voice to a whisper, lingering over the words while trembling himself with the horror he conjured up.

“But just as the cord of life is snapping”—clicking a finger and thumb together as he said this—“I have seen a look, indescribable. It lasts for the fraction of a second, but it is heaven—and hell. . . . Do you know, Frayne, when the feeling comes over me, I long to photograph—death. That fraction of a second I told you of eludes me. I keep forgetting ; and I long to remember. . . .”

He spoke as a man when the craving of some drug is upon him ; there was the same hungry look in his eyes.

“I keep losing the thing I’m after ; but once I fix it, I’ll have tracked Fear to its final lair. Then, perhaps, I shall be at rest, and this awful craving cease.” He sighed, and passed a hand wearily across his eyes. “But it is a relief to tell someone about it after all these years of silence. You were ever a good listener, Frayne, even though you despise this sort of talk. And you will keep the secret well,” he added with a sort of parched chuckle.

And so he talked and raved—now madly exultant ;

now cringing with a fear which shook him like an ague—a morbid, deadly fear which yet seemed to give him an exquisite pleasure. It was chiefly on this one subject that his mind passed beyond the bounds of sanity.

Michael tried not to listen, but heard each hateful word of it. He fixed his gaze on the lantern, the light of which kept ebbing lower and lower like the flickering of a man's life. And the shadows crept in, and closer, until every object in the room took on the semblance of some dead horror. He could see again the stiff, silent figure of old Jimmy; the wide unseeing eyes in the grey solemn face. How clearly he could trace each frozen outline!

Then it was himself he saw, seated in the same chair, so pale and stiff. . . . But here his manhood reasserted itself, the simple strength of him crushed and cast aside such thoughts.

Bailey suddenly roused himself as though awakening to a normal consciousness from an evil dream.

"I'll tell you all," he said, with some return of his calm. "I promised I would, didn't I?"

Then he set himself to explain how, when with the army in Italy, he had met with the niece of di Conti, then reduced to an extreme poverty. He had been with her cousin when he fell, and had borne to her the news of the death of this her only relative. He had learned from the dead Italian of the di Conti claim on Marley, but had been withheld by the girl's pride, and at her express command, from asking anything on her behalf. But he was the only one left to champion the girl's cause, and he had vowed to himself to see it through.

Curious to note the twofold madness at work in the man's unbalanced mind—the lifelong fetish of fear which was the greater of the two, and this fixed idea of himself as the instrument of justice which had made a fanatic of him.

“Yes, I loved her in my own way, Frayne, though she does not return it. But greater than the love of a woman is the lust of fear.”

He paused to cast a look of unreasoning terror about the room before continuing :

“It was something of the sort that drove me here that night—he died. It was horror of the place that drew me back again when you and Kelly watched. The influence of this accursed room ! . . . God ! I shall be alone with it again to-night, and the terror will fall upon me with all its shadows from the grave.”

In his terror, his face underwent a remarkable change ; it became drawn and grey, and his sunken eyes had a haunted look in them. Super-sensitive from boyhood in regard to his dread of fear, all the fine brain of the man had focussed on this one form of emotionalism ; until, with the gradual loss of moral control, something in his brain had snapped. The war had hastened it. Probably it was the first murder which had definitely turned a mind already trembling in the balance.

All this Michael summed up as he sat silent and waited. There was no hope of a rescue, he knew. He had removed all chance of it himself in telling none of his intentions. Dick, who alone knew, was not now in England, having crossed over to France the day before. . . .

The past rose up before him ; thoughts of Esmée came crowding into his mind and he knew at last what the sweetness of a woman meant. . . . But that was over now, and better so. There was to be no living out his years with the bitterness of loss before him. His death, too, would not be unavailing : if Kelly acted on the sealed letter he had left for him, Dick’s name would be cleared of all reproach. Then at the thought of little Kelly’s round-eyed astonishment on reading the communication to him, all at once the ghost of a smile rose to Michael’s lips.

Bailey stared at him incredulously. "You have no fear? The thought amuses you?" he queried.

"Not altogether, Bailey. But how exactly did poor old Jimmy die? You have not told me yet."

"You shall know the truth of that too. There is still time." Bailey stood with his back to the fireplace, leaning forward every now and then to peer into the gloom ahead, with his fixed, expectant stare.

"I had no thought of it at the time," he said, "but there was that about the room which simply drew me. I *had* to return that night, though unconscious myself of any definite object in doing so. I got out by the bedroom window, lowering myself to the ground at the old wing, and entering here by the conservatory door as I have done to-night. . . . I crept up the stair on tiptoe. . . . Jimmy did not hear me; he was asleep in his chair. As I stood and watched him, I thought of the luxury in which he lived, contrasting it with a girl's bare struggle—with death as her only release. My blood boiled as I thought of it. . . .

"Old Jimmy was a man of good heart; he could be hard, too, I knew. I could have appealed to him, and he might have given as a charity what was a right. He had no imagination, and she—she had too much pride. He had never imagined what it was to suffer in mind—just like you, Frayne. . . .

"All at once, I longed to see it in his eyes—the fear which has haunted my soul. Why should he get off scot-free—and you too, Frayne—when I have to go through life with a dead weight on my soul? And yet," he whispered to himself, "and yet, there is an exquisite something about it. . . . You laugh, Frayne, at what I say?"

He strode up to Michael, his face transformed into that of another person altogether.

"It was in this way that Marley laughed at me when

he awoke," he said in a snarling voice curiously unlike the gentle tones of Bailey. "I had come up behind him and thrust the muzzle of my pistol against his head. I cannot say what force was urging me to it. The pistol was in my coat pocket; I always carry one. . . . And Jimmy woke up and laughed. I cannot say what took me—a nervous twitching of the muscles, the cursed influence of the room, perhaps: but I know not what. The pistol went off—at least, I heard the report of it. . . . And old Jimmy lay huddled up in his chair, dead. . . . And I liked old Jimmy," he said, his face twitching.

"They say fear paralyses thought. Not a bit of it, as I told you before. I resolved to ransack the safe in case there might be a will to be destroyed to clear the way. Oh, I thought of everything," and he chuckled to himself in a voice hoarse with emotion.

"I was wearing an overcoat, and there were gloves in the pocket of it. I put them on, and left no marks. Yes, I overhauled the safe and was glad I had. Old Jimmy was dead, you see, and nothing could bring him back to life," he repeated gently; then suddenly a new note came into his voice.

"But it is different with you, Frayne. I hate the solid simplicity of your nature. . . . And you tracked Miss di Conti down—you and Miss Favoril, between you, tracked her down, and insulted her with your offer of money for work done—an angel like that! God, for that alone I could kill you now. But I shall see the look in your eyes first. . . ."

"And how are you going to do that?" Michael questioned with a perfect unconcern in his tones.

Bailey stood transfixed by the dauntless eyes upon him. "Not afraid?" he said in almost a whisper. "With everything in life to live for?"

Michael gave a short laugh. "I don't know so much

about that," he said pleasantly, as though carrying on a friendly conversation. "No, Bailey, I really don't fancy my life so much as all that."

"What! with the girl you love ready to fall into your arms?"

Michael's brows knitted into a frown. "Now," he said, "I don't know what you are talking about."

"Miss Favoril—who else?"

Michael broke out hotly at last: "You fool, it is Dick she is marrying!"

Bailey stared at him, then began to laugh softly. "So Dick never told you? And it never occurred to you why he is taking himself off to the other ends of the earth?"

As Bailey watched the other's expression, his saner senses slipped from him suddenly again. "Ah," he gloated, "so I have shaken you out of your infernal calm at last? You know now what fear is—answer me."

But Michael did not speak for a time, and a deadly hush fell upon the hall.

"No," he replied at last, "not fear, Bailey. Regret, perhaps, that I should die before I know the end of it. . . . But who knows? It may not all end here." He spoke in a changed voice and his face was very grave.

Bailey's expression changed yet again; he grew calmer for the moment. "Perhaps not," he assented. "All the same, you are for it now, Frayne. You are of the strong who stand in the way of the weak. You are of the kind who does not know what it is to live—nor what it is to die. . . ."

But even as he spoke, there was that behind his calmness which worked him to his final frenzy. Watching him narrowly, Michael was wondering how soon the climax would arrive that must mean his end; when Bailey, as if guessing the working of his mind, supplied the answer.

"You have now five minutes more to live."

He said it very softly, taking out his watch and holding it in his hand. But a deadly smoothness in his voice warned Michael that every word of it was meant.

"Why don't you speak, Frayne? . . . Have you nothing more to say?"

Only the brooding silence answered him, and the gloom creeping up and over.

"Why don't you speak? . . . After you have gone I shall be damnably alone." A frozen terror sparkled in his eyes, but his lips were smiling.

"My God! What's that?" He whipped round to peer behind him. "Nothing," he muttered, with a twisted smile. "Only the shadows, creeping up to listen."

Then he looked at his watch and said:

"One minute more."

He had moved in closer; Michael could almost hear the seconds beat out their death-tattoo. It took him back to the crowded Court house when Dick's life had been in the balance. That was over, he reflected, with a sigh. But even yet he did not connect the present with himself; or it may have been that his own life was of no great value to him—there was such a problem in it, such a heartache if he lived. So his detachment remained with him, and he did not take the trouble to visualise his death. Not yet. . . .

Then Bailey spoke. "Now," he said, consulting his watch for the last time, before replacing it in his pocket. Then he rested the pistol point behind Michael's ear.

At the cold thrust of the steel, Michael found himself speculating in a vague sort of way whether Bailey had chosen the right spot: He hoped so. And then, whether Capper would come along after all was over and pronounce upon it in his ghoulish way. His thoughts passed on to Esmée. After that, for the fraction of a second, a horror of death swept over him, and the shrinking forecast of

dissolution took a hold of him till he could feel the cold sweat bead thickly on his forehead. His mind seemed to range through the centuries, so swiftly did it pass through time and space. He would have cried out, but his mouth was parched and his lips stiff and hard. . . .

How hot the muzzle of the pistol had grown! It was searing a way right into his brain. . . . Then an ecstasy of calm stole over him. It was over—he could start afresh. . . .

“Ah,” said Bailey, dropping his hand for an instant to look for what he sought in Michael’s eyes.

CHAPTER XXXV

KELLY had left the car at the vicarage gate. He got the surprise of his life when, about to jump in, he beheld a small veiled figure already seated, and heard a voice which said coaxingly but firmly.

"Please, Mr. Kelly, don't make any fuss. I know all about it, and I am going with you. . . . PLE-EASE. . . . There isn't any time to argue."

Then, as he hummed and hawed :

"It doesn't in the least matter what anyone says. I am *going*. . . . Only *do* hurry !"

Kelly recognised who it was ; but to say he was at a loss how to handle the situation would be to grossly underestimate his condition of mind.

"Wh-where to ?" he stuttered. Realising his helplessness, he was trying to gain time.

She answered him in her clear, concise way : "Marley House—but hurry !"

He opened his mouth to speak, but she proved too quick for him.

"Oh, be quick !" she cried. "We have no time to waste. Jump in !"

And this is precisely what Kelly did do. He jumped in. The chauffeur started the car on Esmée's peremptory order, and off they went. Thus it came about that Kelly found himself speeding into the darkness, to a doubtful destination, with a girl he scarcely knew, on an errand about which he was only a shade less vague. The fact of

the matter was that he had been whirled off his feet by Esmée, as had many a better man before him.

Poor little Kelly! He sat in the motor and watched the darkness rush past, and an overpowering sense of depression came upon him. He was very miserable, and the girl added to his misgiving. What had induced him to bring her? he was wondering. There might be any sort of a horror awaiting them at the old house; for, somehow, belief in his own fanciful theory had deepened with the girl's presence. She had said, 'I know.' What did she mean by that? And why had she said, without a moment's hesitation, 'To Marley House'?—like an echo from his own far-flung fancy, giving substance to that dimly-visaged shadow in his mind, and thereby bringing to the point of action a decision over which he might have lingered otherwise. This is a fact that he admitted to me afterwards. 'She hustled me,' is how he actually put it.

His misgiving was grown so strong that once or twice he was on the point of turning back with her. Now I wonder what would have happened had he tried? You see, I happen to know Esmée; I also happen to have been 'hustled.'

He muttered nervously: "I should never have allowed you to come."

And for answer she leaned forward and addressed the chauffeur: "Drive the car for all she is worth," she said in her coaxing way; and the car plunged forward into the night.

She was dogged by some unaccountable fear, which communicated itself to Kelly, and so back to her again with redoubled energy, though neither of them spoke a word of what was in their mind. It was her woman's instinct and her woman's love which had led her to it. 'I just *knew*,' is how she explained it later. 'And there was no place else he could have gone.'

"Well," said Kelly, "there's the chauffeur. You can wait in the car with him."

To this she made no answer, but sat forward, peering into the darkness, her eyes very round and bright and her lips pressed close together. She had a wonderful control over herself, though every now and then a tremor would shake the little white hand gripping the side of the motor so tightly. She remained perfectly silent ; for once she had not a word to say for herself.

The avenue was a mile long ; half-way up it, Kelly told the chauffeur to drive slowly. The engines were running smoothly, they made but little noise. Further on, Kelly stopped the car, and stepped out.

"You will wait here in the car," he said.

Esmée jumped to the ground. Her face was a study in scorn and resolution as she answered :

"No ; the car can look after itself."

"But you——"

"I," she said, "shall not be in the way, and the chauffeur may be of use."

At that Jakes, the chauffeur, sat up and took an interest.

They had stopped at an angle of the drive which commanded the old wing. The moon was obscure, but a faint point of light glimmered through the trees, and caught Kelly's eye.

"There is no time to argue about it," he snapped. "But you are running a risk, and making me responsible for it."

He did not say another word, but turned and walked swiftly towards the house, Esmée pattering behind him and Jakes bringing up the rear.

The night was very still. A dry twig which snapped underfoot sounded like the echo of a pistol-shot. Kelly quickened his pace. When they had come to the conservatory door, he whispered :

"We'll take off our boots here. . . . Don't look so blank about it," he added irritably, addressing himself to Jakes. "All you've got to do is to keep perfectly quiet and look after the lady."

Jakes was young ; also he was intelligent, and even in the dark Miss Esmée had taken her toll of homage. He nodded, falling in with the spirit of the thing, and pleased with the unknown venture which constituted him the girl's guardian. Service in France had quickened his wits.

Esmée did not speak, and Kelly whispered :

"Now follow me, and be absolutely quiet—if you can." In a state of tension, he had no time to pick his words.

The girl's eyes flashed ; she looked as though she could have said a lot ; but, whatever may have been in her mind, she had the sense to keep it to herself.

Kelly opened the door and closed it very softly again, turning the key, which he found in the lock. The moon shone through the glass roof and filled the conservatory with a ghostly radiance. It shed its light on the stone staircase.

They stood for an instant, waiting. And as they listened the sound of a man's laughter grew faintly audible ; the softness of it was unnatural. The utter unexpectedness of it gave rise to a smothered exclamation from Jakes.

"Quiet, you fool !" hissed Kelly.

Esmée's breathing quickened as she watched him draw his revolver.

Kelly took the lead, signing to Jakes to follow, while Esmée came last of all ; and in this order they padded noiselessly in their stocking soles across the stone flags. They felt their way up silently, pausing at times to listen. Esmée's heart beat furiously now, desperate over the time they took, and listening—for what she dreaded. She knew not what it was, but Michael was in the room of death and there was danger. Her woman's instinct had

no need to travel further. Would they be in time? That was the agonising thought which filled her universe.

Quick in all his ways, Kelly was not to be hurried; he never spoiled a thing by that, once he was in action. At the top, he looked back and signalled them to wait; then himself advanced on tiptoe, sidling along the wall till he was swallowed up in the darkness of the passage.

Gradually, stealthily, and with an infinite patience, he drew a corner of the curtain aside and peered through. . . .

The light of the lantern on the floor, now flickering low, was what directed his gaze. Suddenly the whole scene was plain before him. In a flash, the naked, sinister meaning of it was revealed. He stood transfixed, with no thought save this—he dared not shoot.

Bailey, stooping over something, shot suddenly upright and cast a glance of terror into the darkness. In that moment, Kelly had hurtled through the portière and on him.

Dimly conscious of a white upturned face and the mad terror in a man's eyes, curious over a sudden flash leaping straight at him, and the deafening report of a shot which echoed from one end of the world to the other, he closed in.

A crowded second: grappling with a hand which gripped his throat; squeezing fingers, thrusting . . . his head forced back. The room was spinning round. He was swaying, staggering, crushed against the wall, still holding off the pistol that was ever drawing nearer. . . .

Lights were dancing madly before his eyes. A man was shouting to him from some infinite point in space. All at once the awful tension slackened. A shot rang out, followed by the sound of a fall.

Bailey lay stretched on the floor. There was a look of frozen terror in his fast-glazing eyes, but his lips were smiling. The room had claimed another victim.

CHAPTER XXXVI

WHEN Michael woke next morning at the Marley Arms, memory of the night before was confused and incoherent as that of an evil dream which passes with the darkness. It was difficult, at first, and in broad daylight, to realise that these things had really happened.

He lay for a moment, turning it over in his mind. Then he looked at the clock, found it was later than he had imagined, so he jumped out of bed and rang the bell. There was so much demanding his immediate attention. First he had to telegraph for Dick. And then—and then? . . .

Then the Boots entered with his shaving water and a parcel.

It was so characteristic of Michael to plunge his razor in the hot water after a casual glance at the parcel. After that he very deliberately opened it, frowning over the knots but never cutting the string. There was a thick note-book inside which proved to be a diary, the writing very cramped and childish in the beginning, and in the end the firm, flowing hand of the grown-up Esmée. He turned the pages, letting them slip through his hand, and wondering, and they rustled as though whispering back their secrets. But there was a letter which said: "READ THIS FIRST," across the top of the envelope, and heavily underlined. And this is what he read:

" . . . I have got to explain, and it is not easy even to write it."

Here the writing darkened as though she had pressed heavily on the paper.

“ I told Dick the truth—I had to, Michael. . . . I said I would marry him and try to forget. I owed him that—at least, I thought I did after all he had been through though we were never engaged. He said nothing at the time except that he would see, and then he went away. Ah, I wanted to tell you this before, but I couldn’t, could I? I heard nothing from him for days, but I knew what his answer would be. For somehow Dick does not go very deep down, does he?—much as we both love him as a friend.

“ Yes, Michael, I knew what he would answer in the end. He has a clean sense of sport right to the heart of him. Was I being a hypocrite? I meant what I said, and I had to tell him. But oh, I was glad! For I have learned a lot since you came into my life, Michael. I want to be a comrade to the man I love—not a possession. You see? I have not done all the teaching since we met, have I?

“ Then the night came when you showed me what you felt. Showed me, too, what a man’s sense of honour meant towards one who was his friend, and who had suffered. You gave me your courage then, Michael. I went straight upstairs and wrote a lie. I said it was all a mistake—that I cared only for him. I knew it was the only way with Dick. It was wrong of me, but I did it because you thought it right. But I never posted the letter—and thank God for it now. Mr. Kelly came round in the car, and you know the rest.

“ Oh, I am glad, Michael, whatever you decide in the end. It would have been a crime. Don’t you see it?—living one’s life with a lie. Would you have been a better man, or would Dick, for this sacrifice? Or could I ever

have been the same woman? That is the only test, after all. Circumstance is already too strong for us. Must we continue fighting all our lives? I have had a letter from Dick this morning, but I want you to decide first before you see it. Now I leave it all to you. But Mickey dear, come soon and tell me.

“First read my diary. I want you to know all about me. No one else has ever seen it, nor ever shall. . . .”

It took him an hour to read it. There was not much, just quaint little entries, odd jottings of her thoughts on life and feelings from time to time. But he read it slowly, as Michael would. One entry he lingered over. This :

“Yes,” she wrote, “I know it now. There is too much of the **PROPERTY** idea in marriage. It is a thing you label with your name, and put safely away—in lavender or in ashes, as the case may be. But you put it away, that is the point, because it is so safe and there is no more need to think of its security. And *this* is just the trouble of it.

“Other things worth having you have to fight to hold ; and that unceasingly. If you sit down and do nothing about it just because it is so safe, then it slips from you. And you deserve to lose. Probably you never deserved to have it at all. If you win a golf championship—anything—you don’t sit down and say, ‘I’ve won it and I’ll hold ; no need to practise any more.’ But this is what you do in marriage, man and woman both. Then you wonder why it fails ! . . .”

The idea seemed to have been growing with her, for some months later (her next entry) she writes :

“Someone has said in a book—I don’t remember where—that ‘free will is the strength of any tie, not its weakness,’ How very true ! The law gives security of tenure,

and makes it safe. It makes it *too* safe, and that is just what is making it so insecure. . . .”

Then comes this footnote :

“*Query*: Can you be comrades with a thing you *own* too much? I have no answer to the question, but my thoughts are my own. . . . You need not own too much in matrimony. I shan’t! I don’t want to, neither do I intend to be owned. I want to need and be needed. . . .

“I shall be a wayfarer, and hold his hand. And that is the very nicest companionship of all, and then we can fight all the way. But fight—yes.

“What shall I think of it, say, five years on?”

Then a later entry, in red ink and heavily underlined :

“It’s all right—it’s merely Michael.”

“Well, I’m damned!” said Michael, beginning to frown and then to smile. What else was there to say?

CHAPTER XXXVII

HE was trying to say something ; but she was conscious only of a confusion of words.

She waited a little and steadied herself. Her hands were gripping the sides of the chair, her eyes fixed on the ground. Presently she began to follow vaguely what he was saying—and that it was about Dick. Then she looked at him squarely, and answered him in the brave, frank way of her :

“I can never marry Dick after this. I can never marry—any other man, whether you pass out of my life or not, Michael.”

That pulled him up abruptly, and a silence followed

“I keep on thinking of Dick. I cannot help it,” Michael answered at last, in his slow, deliberate way.

“I know what you are feeling about it. I love and honour you for it. It’s—it’s just like you, Mickey. But it isn’t a bit of good. . . . It isn’t really. Last night I would have posted that lie to him. Now I can’t. And here—here is his letter. It came this morning.”

She moved over to him as she spoke, with the letter in her hand, and stood close to him while he read it, gazing upon him and resting the tips of her fingers on his arm.

“Good luck to you and Michael.”

And that was all Dick said.

The paper slipped through Michael’s fingers and fluttered

to the floor. The red crept into his cheeks and he faced her with a puzzled, boyish, appeal in his eyes.

"Ah, Mickey," she whispered, "don't look at me like that. It's Fate."

And then she explained :

"When Dick was in trouble . . . I think it was then I most nearly loved him—at first. . . . Now, it is all so different. There is something strange, I can't quite understand it myself. . . ."

She glanced up at his troubled face in that adorable way of hers, and that brought the smile to his lips.

"And I did love you never guessing how much I cared for you. And—and your dearness about it all."

She gave his hand a little squeeze ; and I fancy, to the end of his life, he will never forget the radiance that had come into her face at the finish.

There fell a deep silence, till he, with a puzzled look in his sea-blue eyes, said :

"I don't—I can't quite understand it yet."

And she smiled her wise little woman's smile. "It means——" she began in almost a whisper, but he did not give her a chance to finish. . . .

A moment later, "Now let me go, Mickey," she said in a little choked voice.

He did not release his hold of her, but took possession more closely—crushingly.

Michael wonders to this day how he would ever have got through the dark times without that dear companionship, and the ever-cheerful courage of her. And she keeps him wondering—for that is the way of a woman, if she be wise.

And so I come to the end of my record. The years pass, and repeat their round of happiness and of sorrow, of light and shade. The old house of Marley remains shut

up, still brooding over its dark secrets. There is a talk of demolishing the old wing when Dick returns, and now I hear he is expected home before the year is out. Well, it may be so. The smoothing hand of Time softens many sorrows, but the old house has still the air of waiting ; it yet retains its mystery.

Bailey left all he owned to Miss di Conti. She is gone back to her own country, beyond which I have been able to elicit nothing of her further history.

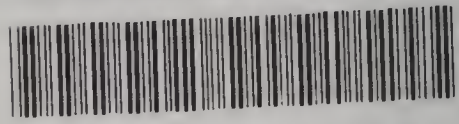
I leave off in the place where I began, in the house of Michael and Esmée. As I write, a small shrill voice calls out impatiently :

“Come. . . . Qui-ick, I want you !”

It is little Miss Esmée junior. I lay down my pen and run.

THE END

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